

Palace of Dreams

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Palace of Dreams

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Summary

A lonely boy at a Lithuanian orphanage creates a memory palace for him to hide away from his despicable circumstances and the nightmares haunting him. In his dreams, his palace becomes reality. And one day, he finds another boy hiding in one of its rooms.

Notes

Rated Explicit because of explicit slash content (underage!), strong violence, explicit imagery of child abuse, explicit imagery of alcohol consumption, strong references of sexual abuse and rape, minor references of hetero-sex, and coarse language. If you need more specific warnings, feel free to add me on Skype (my ID: maitai1327) where I can personally answer any questions you might have before you read the story.

In short: The story contains explicit elements and sensitive topics, so nope, it's not a good idea to read it if you want to avoid disturbing material.

Mainly based on the *Hannibal* TV show characters, but also contains some elements of *Hannibal Rising*.

Thanks so much to Silverfeathered_Angel and The-blackfirewolf for the wonderful betawork.

The Last Room

Hannibal despises everything around him, but he hides a beautiful world in his mind. It's the only thing he can still be proud of. And, as a small child, he was raised to be a proud, noble man. He has just turned fifteen, but he has had to learn how to become one on his own. After his outer world collapsed and burned to ashes, he has been collecting the beauty inside his mind. No one can take that away from him. Not again.

At first, a long time ago, he just tried to recall some pleasant childhood experiences whenever he felt that his surroundings were unbearable. But it has started to grow with each day. More and more beauty added to the rooms of a palace made of fantasies. Some of them are real memories, some of them imaginary pictures, and all kept inside his head. Marble floors, playful sunshine on golden mirrors, carpets, scents, music, echoes, colors... Everything that protects him from accepting that the filth, the cold, the starvation and the horrors are the only reality he can ever know.

Slowly, the palace was built in his dreams too. Brick by brick, it became clearer as time passed, and after a few months, it wholly consumed the usual world of dreams. Now it's only the palace he can see, whenever he falls asleep.

Surrounded by all the wonderful objects he builds for himself with the help of his imagination from the alluring fragments of his past, he is the only living creature in the huge palace.

Beauty and perfection. Nothing else.

And then, one night, something unexpected happens.

Hannibal keeps wandering from room to room like he does so often. His shadow crawling on the brocade covering the walls, soft steps on the expensive carpets, his slow, calm breaths mingling with the empty silence of the rooms... He opens the last door of a long corridor. It leads to an empty room, not yet furnished. Hannibal still can't decide whether he should place a sculpture there, or he should remove the walls and the roof to create an open balcony. He has been pondering over this question for a while now.

But as he looks around now to evaluate the empty room, suddenly, he spots something that makes his fingers freeze on the door handle. The room is not vacant. A skinny, frowzy boy is standing in one corner; his hands clasping together in front of him anxiously. The boy is shivering from cold because he is only wearing a pair of boxer shorts and an oversized, stained t-shirt. He seems a bit younger than Hannibal; maybe fourteen.

Hannibal steps back, closes the door, and then carefully opens it again. The young boy is still there. He is standing on the marble floor bare feet like Hannibal, though Hannibal never feels cold here. This is his own mind, he can control his senses. However, the smaller boy seems uncomfortable, fingers entwined, blinking rapidly at the play of shadows on the clean floor as Hannibal moves the door.

The young boy's face shows mistrust. His blue eyes are full of caution, but he doesn't look straight at Hannibal, only at nearby spots around his ankles.

Hannibal closes and opens the door six more times, but when the boy still won't disappear, he steps inside. He has to figure out what is going on in his palace.

The smaller boy smells like cheap shampoo and fish. Raw fish. As a punishment for a minor disobedience, Hannibal was ordered last Friday to help out in the kitchen, and his task was to strip scales from a bucketful of fish. The fish was reeking so badly that it made his nostrils tremble and his stomach twist. He hasn't been able to forget about that smell since then. The scales bruised his fingers with the myriad of tiny cuts, so tiny that they were unseen, only palpable... But the pain didn't disturb him. He got used to it. However, the smell, which infiltrated his skin, his invisible wounds, and his flesh, remained with him for days.

He also received a sharp punch from the cook because he was gazing at the pots on the stove too intently. The old man thought Hannibal was hungry and wanted to steal some food. But he was simply intrigued by the way those different types of ingredients were simmering, transforming, leaving their original state to become something more valuable, more beautiful...

As Hannibal looks closely, he perceives that this boy also has a black eye. It's a big, bluish mark crossing his left cheek, ending by the pale line of his jawbone. Its color is like the velvet of the expensive dress Hannibal's mother used to wear when she went to church.

Hannibal doesn't want to speak. He wants the other boy to be the one who breaks the silence. But the boy just stands there, hands fidgeting nervously with the corner of the shabby t-shirt he is wearing, eyes cast down on the floor.

Finally, Hannibal reminds himself that this is just a dream, the boy might not even be there, so he takes a big step in his direction, and with one finger, he pokes the younger boy in the shoulder. The boy flinches, and takes a hasty step backwards.

He is really there. He feels real, at least. Hannibal has sensed the warmth of his body through the t-shirt. It still lingers on his fingertip, seconds after the brief touch. The smaller boy slowly looks up; his blue eyes are full of little lights. Small glimmers of hidden feelings, more like stars on a summer night sky, not like the common, low, animalistic expression in other people's eyes.

The boy plucks up enough courage to speak: he says something in a language Hannibal doesn't understand. From the intonation, Hannibal guesses that it's a question.

Now it's his turn to become distrustful. What is this strange boy doing here? How could he find his way inside? This palace is only for Hannibal, and no one else has the right to enter. Who is this intruder?

Hannibal steps to the door, and opens it.

This is just a dream... It's time to speak. He can speak here, this is his own mind, and his voice is not real. The words he will speak remain inside his head. The disgusting, filthy

outside world with its nightmares and demons won't hear anything from it.

He inhales slowly, carefully, preparing for words leaving his lips, but then he finds himself unable to utter anything. Not even in his own head. He just makes a swift motion with his left hand to show the younger boy that it's time to leave.

The smaller boy doesn't obey; he starts creasing the lower part of his t-shirt again with shivery fingers. His eyes are on the ground.

Go away. This is my home, Hannibal shows the boy again with his hand. Somehow, speaking and hearing his own voice seems impossible. Even in his own mind, nothing's worth his words, his voice, the air he inhales... He makes another gesture to make the younger boy see that he should get out and leave.

The smaller boy hangs his head, mumbling something in front of him in a foreign language again.

Hannibal repeats the motion a bit slower. The boy remains in place.

Hannibal once more illustrates with his white, slim hand how the boy should walk out, but the boy still doesn't move.

At first, Hannibal considers dragging him out by sheer force, but then he changes his mind. It's curious that this boy is here. And every time something awakens curiosity in him, it also attracts him. He gets bored easily, and often has the feeling that there is nothing that could be worth his attention. Everything is calculable and empty. The things they do to him, the things they say to him, the way they try to break him... It's just plain disgusting. Ugly. *Pigs*. They make him feel locked inside his own head, alone, trying to be as far as possible from the world of simple, noisy, abominable people. Everything outside becomes less and less interesting.

Whenever he is here, truly alone in his palace, it's freedom. And this boy disturbs it. But also makes it more interesting. How could he get inside?

Hannibal goes round the boy with paced steps. He takes a full circle before he stands in front of him again. He smells the boy's curly, brown hair once more. Under the smell of raw fish, he can also sense machine oil.

A poor kid.

Hannibal thinks of his parents, his sister, and the light, clean smells of his childhood. Warm, newly baked cakes served on silver plates... Freshly washed, white clothes... Chandeliers with crystals...

The younger boy takes a step closer, and he carefully touches Hannibal's gray pajama shirt, which is ragged by the cheap, old washing machines of the orphanage. He rubs the aged fabric with two fingers as if he was checking it. Then he also pokes Hannibal in the arm.

Hannibal haughtily tosses his head back, and steps away from the boy with sudden coldness, trying to show him that this palace is all his. A stranger shouldn't touch him as if Hannibal was the same abject creature like him.

The younger boy doesn't seem disturbed by the reaction, he follows Hannibal, and pinches the sleeve of the pajama shirt again. He mutters something in his foreign language while touching the fabric.

Hannibal starts wondering if he should experiment with this boy. It would be interesting to see how a body would react when he crashed the windpipe with a quick move of his palm. How long would the boy twist and squirm on the floor before all the air would leave his heaving chest? What would the sound be like? Would it resemble the one the oldest instructor let out while dying of lung infection last winter? Hannibal was scrubbing the floor in front of that bedroom, and he heard the choking, croaking sounds for hours.

No one would punish him in his own palace. He can do whatever he feels like.

The boy pulls on the sleeve of Hannibal's pajama shirt again, and asks something. Hannibal frees the fabric with a quick, skilled motion.

Now, the younger boy puts one hand on his own chest, and says only one word, "Will."

Then he repeats it a few times, slow and clear. Hannibal suspects that it's the boy's name. He has already met this name in an American novel he read in the library. It was translated into Lithuanian, of course, but the names remained the same. In that book, there was an old black man called Will, who was burned alive by a group of Southern farmers.

"Will," the boy utters for a last time, resting his hand above his heart, then he points at Hannibal questioningly.

Hannibal turns away from him without a response, and walks around the room prideful, with his chin high.

Will retreats; he crouches in one of the corners, pulling his knees up, hugging them with his pale arms. He is just a pile of disorderly, fish-smelling curls and stained, worn t-shirt now.

Hannibal avoids looking at him for a while. He considers what he should do to Will. He could bring some binding material from one of the other rooms. For example the golden stranded cords the curtains are fastened with. With those, he could incapacitate Will, and maybe cut Will's teeth out with the dagger decorating the wall of the nearest corridor. One by one. Then he could take those teeth and keep them for later. He might mix them into the porridge given for breakfast so that the meanest boys would choke on them. And he might gauge Will's eyes out and slip them in the chicken pie served only for employees. That memory would be an intriguing part of his collection for sure.

He can do whatever he wants here.

Hannibal leaves the room in order to fetch the dagger. It's better to have the weapon first, in case Will would try to attack him or steal something from his palace. Then, he can still decide

how to use it. Should he cut off Will's tongue for example? Or his fingers? Oh, yes, what about the fingers? Those could also be used in the chicken pie, couldn't they?

He might also strip Will's skin off like he did to that disgusting fish last week.

He stands tiptoe, trying to reach the dagger, but it's a bit too high, so he turns to pull an ebony bench closer. He suddenly stops dead. Will is standing right behind him, just a step away. The younger boy is looking neither at Hannibal nor the dagger, just keeps his head hung, chin sunken on his chest. His odd, glimmering blue eyes are directed towards the marble floor, arms crossed as tightly as if he was hugging his own chest to protect himself from cold.

There is something innocent, vulnerable and mysterious in the way Will is standing there with his quivering limbs, his timid expression and the huge black-eye. The picture reminds Hannibal of something he doesn't want to get reminded of. He feels his lips pressing together with abrupt bitterness.

He turns away from Will, steps on the bench, and removes the dagger from the wall. Soon, he stands in front of Will again, pointing at Will's forehead with the silvery blade. Will blinks a couple of times, and the right corner of his mouth squirms, but he doesn't back off. He is still keeping his eyes on the ground.

For a minute, they are frozen in this posture. Then Will reaches out, and with two fingers, nips the sleeve of Hannibal's pajama shirt again, touching it as if checking once more whether it's real or not. Hannibal wants to pull his hand away, but it's too late. The next moment, Will gives an interested, curious jab with the tip of his forefinger at the red ligature mark around Hannibal's wrist. Will taps the bruise, and then pulls his finger back. He clasps his hands in front of him again.

Hannibal stands still, dagger pointing at Will, while Will rubs his palms together, trying to warm up a bit.

After a slow, silent exhalation, Hannibal lets the dagger sink, and it soon hangs by his side limp in his hand. He gives Will a nod, signaling him to come, and Will follows him obediently. Hannibal leads him back to the room Will first appeared in. Then, sending him inside with a rough push, Hannibal shuts the door in front of Will, and holding it with his arm so that Will can't open it, he hastily turns the key and locks the room.

Through the broad wooden slab, he can hear Will's surprised gasp.

And then Hannibal turns, and simply leaves Will there, locked in. He walks through corridors, rooms and stairs with aimed, quick steps. Finally, he reaches a balcony, where he sits down on the marble blocks. There is nothing else surrounding the building just the dark blue and shiny stars.

He stays there, gazing at the night sky until he wakes up in the morning. He hopes that tomorrow, when he is going to return, Will won't be there anymore.

The Wish

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Will is surprised when he wakes up in the morning. He spent hours locked among the empty marble tiles of a strange building, and suddenly, he is back in the storage room of the attic his father rents. Will has to sleep on top of the dusty boxes because there is not enough room here for a bed.

He sits up under the blanket, rubbing his eyes sleepily. What happened? How did he get back here? And first of all, how could he appear in that marble room?

Maybe it happened because he wished so deeply that he would die. Last night, before he fell asleep, he was lying awake for hours, staring into the darkness, and the only thing he wished for was dying. He didn't cry. No tears at all. He was not upset in the least. He was just staring, and wishing for death.

When he closed his eyes, sank into darkness, and then saw a marble-paved room, he was relieved. He thought that the shiny room was part of the afterlife. A sort of chamber for freed souls. But then the cold became way too real, and that other boy - the pale, lean blond with those narrow, snake-like-empty eyes - seemed perfectly alive as well.

It must have been more like a dream, because in the morning, he is back on top of his boxes again, blinking at the rays of sunlight coming through the holes on the roof.

His limbs are a bit numb though, as if last night, the storage room turned somewhat colder than usual. It's strange, because Will got used to sleeping in low temperature. His dad usually tries to save money with switching off the heating.

Will shakes his lower arms a few times. Why are his muscles as torpid as if he had truly spent his night in a cold, paved room without his blanket? It was an odd dream, that's for sure.

His dad is still sleeping on the couch - snoring loudly - while Will changes from his father's old t-shirt to his school uniform.

Afterwards, Will searches for something edible in the fridge, but it contains nothing else just three buckets full of crushed ice and half-alive fish staring at him with glassy eyes and fluttering convulsively with their tails under the piles of ice. And a bottle of liquor. After finding nothing useful, Will takes some money from the pocket of his father's jeans, which rests in a pile on the floor. His fingers are still shaking, he really is cold after the strange dream he had about the empty room. *Curious.*

He finds enough change for a cup of hot tea. That will do. In the evening, he is going to have dinner at the coffee shop where he does some work after school: he washes dishes and gets a free meal in exchange. It should be enough for today. Hopefully, tomorrow his father will be able to finish fixing the oil leakage of the motor boat he currently repairs, and then they can buy some lunch. Or perhaps his father might manage to sell some of the fish... Though Will suspects that his dad is not going to be in the condition to go to the market before work, and the animals will slowly rot in the fridge like last time.

Will wishes that he was a bit older and he was allowed to sell the fish on his own according to the rules of the fish market. But unfortunately, he should be at least sixteen years old to do so. Maybe he should try to find a buyer for the fish in the coffee shop. However, he is extremely nervous about being conversational. He always ends up talking stupid, and stutters when he has to maintain eye contact, and blurts out weird observations, and makes himself offensive or laughable, or both at the same time... He is certain that he is not the proper person to try to coax people to do crooked business with him. But he should definitely find a way to sell the fish.

He creates a list in his head about his tasks for the day. He'll also need to check in the garage whether his father has managed to fix the boat correctly so far. Last month, it happened once that his father had been so drunk that he had messed up the electric connections of a boat, and a customer suffered a serious accident. Will surmises that his dad will probably be ordered by the Court to pay the victim a tremendous amount of money as indemnification. And Will is worried about this debt enough; he doesn't want any more trouble, so now he also keeps an eye on the nearly finished works of his dad. Luckily, he spent his summers from the age of ten helping out with his father's repair tasks, so he has a basic knowledge of the job, and he hopes he can check at least the most important functions of the boats his dad fixes. There aren't many purchases lately though, probably because of his dad's ruined reputation after the accident. Will guesses that they'll have to move to another town soon. It goes like this. His father loses his job because of his drinking issues, and then they are on their way to a new, even worse place. Always a bit less comfortable, a bit smaller, a bit more beggarly...

While sitting in the least popular section of the school bus, staring out the window, and hugging his bag protectively, Will tries to think about the marble-paved room he visited last night. And he thinks about it during lessons. And during breaks. And he still fantasizes about the mysterious room while cleaning dishes at the coffee shop. He finds no one who would be willing to buy the fish, though it doesn't really surprise him. The awkward, brief conversations just make him feel edgy and tense without any positive result. He quickly directs his attention back to the marble room. Maybe he could stay there tonight. Stay there forever, freezing and starving, and slowly dying, but finally out of his world. Gently drifting away...

After sneaking into the garage, checking the half-finished motor boat and making some smaller adjustments to the gear box, Will walks to their attic and sits down in a corner to do his homework.

"I'm too slow," he murmurs once impatiently, chewing his pencil, but he can't help it, he is still distracted because of the strange room. It's late and dark outside when he is done, and

it's time to fetch his father before he would get kicked out of the pub and robbed of the very little money he still has while lying unconscious on the empty street.

Will goes out to find him, and he has to visit four different pubs before succeeding. He doesn't like these places, the harsh laughter, the heavy smell of smoke and the old drunkards staring at him, making dubious jokes about him he doesn't even comprehend, heads turning after him, brash remarks spat at him... When he finally finds his dad, it's too late. He has already drunk way too much again and is sleeping in a gutter behind the fifth pub. Will drags him out with great effort.

Checking anxiously, he sees that his dad has absolutely no money in his wallet, though it's not a robbery this time. The drunken, half-conscious man's neck is covered with stains of gaudy, harsh pink lipstick, so Will infers that his father spent their last few bills on a prostitute. Oddly, Will is relieved when he realizes this. At least, his dad fucked that woman somewhere out in the streets, and didn't take her to the attic. So, this time, Will doesn't have to listen to the brutish noises they make while he tries to fall asleep in his small storage room.

He takes a slow, deep breath, and then gently shakes his father by the shoulder.

"Dad, come on. It's time to go home."

He manages to wake his father up on his ninth attempt. He tries not to shake him too hard so that his father wouldn't get mad when he regains consciousness, and Will attains his goal. His dad just emits a displeased growl, and then leans on his shoulder and lets him take him home.

It's almost midnight when he finally finishes taking off his dad's dirtied clothes, showering off the vomit from his chest, and putting him on the couch to sleep. Will is already trembling from weariness, and after taking a quick shower, he falls on the boxes in the storage room like a sack of dead meat.

He is too tired to think about the room again. Or to think about anything at all. He just closes his eyes and lets the night pull him into darkness.

When he senses light and feels cold, he opens his eyes again with surprise. He is back in the marble room, which makes his heart jump in his chest.

Everything is so white, so shiny, so elusive...

He spends about an hour squatting in the corner, enjoying the silence and the loneliness and the pure beauty of the room. He is out of his world. This place is not friendlier either, but at least it's different.

After his body turns too numb in this position, he gets up with a soft moan.

Staggering to the door, he tries to open it, but he hears a sudden clink. The sound of a lock clicking to its place. And Will understands. The other boy must be standing outside, and when hearing Will's uncertain, approaching steps, he has turned the key and locked Will inside.

It makes Will wonder how long the blond must have been waiting outside, doing nothing else, just listening, with his hand on the key.

“I’m sorry for being here,” Will breaks the silence tremulously. “I understand that I’m not supposed to be here. Are you angry with me?”

No answer.

“And... and... I’m sorry for touching your bruise. Is that why you locked me in?”

Still no reply.

“Do you understand at all what I say?”

Silence.

“Can you hear me?”

Nothing.

Will lets out a small sigh, and then he stumbles back into the corner. Actually, he is even a bit thankful to the blond for not answering. This way, it’s easier to believe that he is alone and he is dead, locked up in a chamber of the afterlife, and he won’t ever have to return to his usual days.

He is tired. Tired of everything; weary and numb. The cold makes him feel even less lively, as if he was a corpse indeed.

Sometimes he hears the other boy’s steps; the blond walks up and down the corridor in front of the door. But every time Will makes a bigger motion to move his freezing limbs, the older boy comes to a halt, and he fumbles for the key, hastily checking if Will is still properly locked in.

Will had a dog once. She was a foxhound with half of her right side burned, supposedly by some chemicals. Will has never learned how she got the wounds; he tamed her on the street, and she had already had the burn marks when he first met her. Everyone called her a monster. But Will saw something else when he looked at her. He could literally feel how lonely she was.

He can clearly remember the first day, when the dog was still mistrustful, watching him from a distance, hiding behind a broken pallet and a waste container. Yet, the animal was unable to simply run away. She felt an instinctive urge to stay close to the strange kid who suddenly appeared in her life. The dog was mesmerized, hostile, and aggressive, baring her teeth, growling. Unable to leave, but also unable to give up her ingrown vigilance and her safe, unfriendly distance.

Somehow, this current situation reminds Will of the first time he met his dog.

Now he wishes that he’d never met her. Maybe, she would still be somewhere out there, alive, if he hadn’t taken her home. Will would readily give up all the moments of happiness

she caused him, if it could bring back his dog, and keep her safe, far away from him.

He sniffles, and represses the urge to cry. He is not the one to let emotions shake him, and he very rarely breaks into tears, but her reminiscence hurts too much. He loved his dog. It was the most genuine connection he has ever had.

Finally, Will slides down along the wall until he is lying on his side, hugging his bent knees. Struggling to feel as little from the cold as possible, he tries to fall asleep.

Blood

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Hannibal feels unable to leave the locked door. Whenever he tries to walk away, his head gets filled with doubts. What if Will manages to break free and steals valuable items from the palace? Or if Will creates a trap, captures Hannibal, and kills him in order to make the palace his? Or if Will locks Hannibal in one of the rooms and occupies all other parts of the building? Will doesn't belong here. He shouldn't be here. His presence means danger. The utter desecration of the peaceful, perfect loneliness and secure beauty of Hannibal's palace. A disgrace. This is Hannibal's own mind! How could anyone creep inside?

At first, Hannibal tries to return to the balcony where he spent the first night Will appeared in his palace. But he is not able to keep that distance again. Each night he feels more forcefully drawn towards Will's locked room. And he reasons it with labeling Will a threat and imagining Will devising plots against his captor, but if Hannibal digs deeper in his own motives, he knows that this is not the truth. For some unknown reason, Will's presence intrigues him above all.

After a few days, he already spends hours leaning against the door frame, eyes closed, dreaming awake, listening to Will's soft, nearly inaudible breathing.

A week passes, and it becomes a habit. Hannibal arrives at his palace, and he goes straight to Will's room. He pays less and less attention to his neatly organized, sumptuous surroundings. Somehow, the decorations and signs of royal comfort have started to lose their charm after Will's first arrival. They seem empty.

Hearing Will's breathing appear inside the room, Hannibal stays there in front of the door for the whole night, sometimes even tries to pick up the pace and inhale-exhale with the exact same speed Will does.

And then, one night something unexpected happens. Hannibal is standing by the door as always, supporting his forehead on the wooden slab, palms pressed against the cold surface as tightly as if he was the one locked in, and Will was the one holding the unreachable world of beauty behind the walls.

Suddenly, Will's breathing becomes audible, but it sounds less even than usual. It's more like hoarse wheezing. He also coughs a bit, but it's not a cough from cold, it's a cough of choking pain. Something's wrong.

Hannibal's muscles tense. In a second, he is on the alert, standing frozen, alarmed by Will's unusually coarse, irregular breaths. Something's wrong... Something's wrong...

Very slowly, he slides his fingers along the door, and with little, careful tugs, he soundlessly removes the key from the lock. And then he leans close enough that he can secretly peer through the keyhole.

Will is cowering in the most remote corner as always, but there are ruby red stains around him on the marble floor this time. *Blood*. Will's face is covered with fresh bruises, and his nose is bleeding. Will breathes streaks of blood noisily and forcefully through his nostrils. He also seems to have a concussion because his body is unstable and shaky. His torso is visibly wobbling. Changing position with a ragged exhalation, Will kneels now on the floor to attempt to clean up the blood spatter with the corner of his oversized t-shirt.

Hannibal watches Will without a stir.

Will tries to mop up a bigger blood stain, but his movements abruptly turn confused, his eyes darken, and then he collapses on the marble floor lifeless.

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When Will wakes up after the long minutes of unconsciousness, he blinks with surprise. There is a purple velvet cushion under his head, and a big, plush blanket covering his body. The red blanket is embroidered with golden yarn.

Will looks around with stupefaction. He is still in the same room, alone, lying on the cold marble floor in his usual corner, but now, there is a pillow and a soft blanket warming him.

He emits a raucous sniff – his nose is still clogged with blood. Red bubbles appear around his nostrils. He discovers that he has been turned to his side so that he wouldn't draw blood in his windpipe while being unconscious. There is a significant blood pool around his jaw on the velvet cushion.

Will tries to sit up, but he feels so dizzy that he falls back on the pillow.

His dad went back to the garage from the pub for his jacket late in the evening, and caught Will checking his repair works. Will tried to make up some excuses why he was there, but his father – even in a heavily drunken state – instantly realized what Will was doing. He got furious because of Will not trusting his competence and expertise, and beat his son with a wrench. Will doesn't even want to imagine how his face must look. He acknowledges that he'll have to take a few days off school, and figure out a pretty good story about how he got the wounds so that Child Protective Services won't interfere with his family life.

He closes his eyes with a pained moan. At first, he tries not to pay attention to the strongly smelling stains of blood sticking the expensive texture to his cheek, but then he musters enough strength and tucks the cushion under his head in a more comfortable angle so that he can rest his head on a clean spot.

Adjusting the blanket around his aching body, he keeps his eyes closed. He tries to rest a bit, and the comfortable warmth and softness help him soothe the pain throbbing in his body. It's so nice that for a moment he even forgets that he is lying on the floor.

Will is not sure if he fell asleep or lost consciousness again, but he recollects his surroundings only when he hears a soft sound from the direction of the door. He opens his eyes and sees the door gradually open, and the older boy is standing there, with a distance-keeping, wary look on his face. He pushes the door with his elbow, inch-by-inch, watching Will as Will blinks sleepily at him.

The older boy keeps his silvery dagger in one hand and a butterfly sword in the other one, and he is wearing similar gray pajamas to the ones he had last time. His pale face is framed by badly-cut, straight mops of colorless hair; his exotic, dark, maroon eyes almost pierce through the soft waves of Will's plush blanket.

He takes a few incredibly slow and cautious steps inside.

And then he sits down in the farthest corner from Will, the closest to the entrance, setting the butterfly sword and the dagger safely by his side onto the floor.

This prompts Will to sit up shakily and give the older boy a weak, painfully lopsided smile. "Thanks for the blanket," he mutters, snorting silently, blood still leaking from his nose.

No reply.

Will braces his back against the wall, hoping that in this position, his head is going to reel with less intensity.

"He is not a bad person, you know. My dad. He is not always like this." Will wipes off some clotted blood from his upper lip. "He is struggling... Falling apart... I'm the only reason he is still trying to hold on. I know how he feels because I always know how people feel. It's some mental illness or what. I have weird pictures in my head, and... and that's it. I know. He wants to be there for me, it's just... not always easy. But he tries, and it matters to me. Sometimes he says he won't drink again and that he doesn't want to hurt me anymore. It lasts for a couple of days. Two or three. He can't change, but he doesn't want to accept it. It's the most difficult thing to accept, I guess."

Will stops talking. He rubs off some more blood remnants from his chin. The older boy doesn't give any sign of understanding what Will told him. He looks blankly at Will with his cold, dark eyes; motionless, like a reptile.

"Do you like your parents?" Will asks timidly. Trying to be talkative makes him feel jittery. Probably, he should simply remain silent, but he is unable to stop. He feels the urge to start a conversation before the older boy would leave again. "I mean, are they nice people? Or a bit mean, or... or..."

No answer.

"Sorry, this was an awkward question, I'll ask something else. Do you have any pets?"

No reply.

“Do you understand me?”

The blond just stares at Will mutely.

“How old are you?”

Will’s next question is followed by the same silence.

“I’m not very good at this,” Will blurts out. A diminutive, edgy half-smile drags his swollen lips. “Being sociable, I mean. I’m not sure how to make a conversation with you. Would you mind choosing a topic for us?”

Still nothing.

“Okay, look, I’m going to show you my name.” Will pokes his forefinger in a stain of blood on the floor, and with the help of the red fluid, he smears the word ‘Will’ on the clean whiteness of marble. “*Will*. You see? That’s my name: Will.”

The blond suddenly stirs. He tilts his head, ever so slightly though, to read the blood-written name.

“*Will*,” Will repeats it for him again. “Now you can write me yours.” He looks at the older boy’s white, slim hands expectantly.

The older boy stays stationary for a long minute, while Will continues watching his hand with patience. Finally, the blond gets up effortlessly, leaving the dagger and the butterfly sword behind, and moves forward, until he can reach the nearest blood stain. Then he kneels down opposite Will, dips his fingertips in the small red pool, and writes a word on the marble floor.

Hannibal.

Will reads it with interest.

“Han-ni-bal?” He pauses briefly. “Is that your name? I came across it once in one of my history books. It might also be a foreign name, so maybe you don’t speak English.” And then Will says the name again with more emphasis, “*Hannibal*.”

A mild, but disdainful pout appears on Hannibal’s lips.

“I pronounced it horribly, didn’t I?” Will lets out a nervous, small laugh. “Okay, I’ll try again, somewhat differently. *Hannibal*.”

This time, the scornful grimace softens on the other boy’s face.

“It was a bit better,” Will concludes. “Okay, I’m going to practice it. In the meantime, you can learn a few colors.”

Will points at the blood stains, and then at his blanket, showing Hannibal that he means the redness, and then he writes with blood, “*Red*”.

“*Red*. That’s a color,” Will explains, pointing at the blood stains and at his blanket again. “Give me a sign if you already know this. Please.”

Hannibal just watches the blood-written word and Will’s explanatory gestures mutely.

Will emits a quiet sigh. “Okay, I presume, then, that you don’t speak English. In that case, I’ll pronounce it for you again: *red*.”

Hannibal doesn’t reveal whether he understands what Will tries to teach him or not.

“This was easy, but now you’ll get a more difficult one,” Will tells him patiently, and writes the word, “*White*,” on the floor. Then he shows Hannibal that he means the color of the marble slabs. “*White*. You see? This is a bit more complicated. *White*. Can you say it?”

Hannibal remains silent.

“Repeat it please. *White*.”

Will watches Hannibal, and Hannibal watches Will, and the mysterious glint appearing in Hannibal’s eyes suggests that the older boy understood what his task might be. For a while, there is tense silence, and in order to break it, Will repeats the word, “*White*,” a couple of times, clear and slow. Hannibal doesn’t follow. Will says, “*White*,” one last time, and then subsides into silence. He is close to giving up the hope that he’ll ever get an answer, but then, all of a sudden, Hannibal’s lips stir, and he echoes the word, “*White*,” quietly. It’s just a mumble.

“Very good.” Will gives him an encouraging smile, even though Hannibal’s intonation was atrocious. But Will feels much better now that he has discovered that Hannibal is able to speak. His attempts to communicate with him might not be so foolish after all. “Now again. *White*.”

“*White*,” Hannibal utters a tiny bit more clearly this time.

Hannibal’s pronunciation is still very bad, but Will can’t stop smiling proudly. Somehow, he has the feeling that the fact that Hannibal is willing to talk to him is precious. “You are doing a great job. Now *red*.”

“*Red*.”

Will makes Hannibal practice the two words a couple of times, and then he leans back to rest his aching head by the wall. He glimpses at Hannibal’s hands, trying to show him that it’s his turn.

Hannibal still hesitates a bit, but then he makes up his mind, takes some blood on his fingers again, and writes a foreign word under the word, “*Red*,” and then another one under the word, “*White*”.

He takes a last long minute, being reluctant, and afterwards, he pronounces the two foreign words for Will, still very quietly.

Will's heart starts beating faster when Hannibal speaks, because it feels like getting a beautiful gift. He tries to utter the two words the same way the older boy did. As long as he sees contemptuous tension on Hannibal's expression, he repeats the words again and again, understanding that his pronunciation was not right. After a few more times, he infers that he has improved, since Hannibal's features turn less condescending.

Will finishes practicing with a thankful smile.

He feels too tired and nauseated to concentrate any longer, so he lies back down on the floor, wrapping himself in the blanket as completely as an Eskimo baby, and tries not to think of the pain burning his body.

Hannibal slowly, carefully inches closer, and after some watchful, thorough considerations, with the very tips of his fingers, he adjusts a golden tassel hanging from the corner of the blanket so that it won't get squeezed under Will's lower arm and won't press him uncomfortably.

And then the older boy swiftly gets up, takes his dagger and sword, and leaves the room with lithesome steps. With a few sharp clinks, he locks the door twice.

The Book

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Hannibal is kneeling beside Will, while the younger boy sleeps on the marble floor, completely wrapped up in his blood-stained blanket, huffing and puffing silently. Hannibal has changed the pillow before Will's arrival this evening, so now the smaller boy is resting his head on a clean, purple cushion, and Hannibal also brought a few more blankets Will could sleep on, making sure that the younger boy won't have to lay himself directly on the cold marble slabs. Will nestled comfortably in the pile of soft, plush fabrics as soon as he arrived, and Hannibal kept watching him from the outside until Will fell asleep.

Will's face looks even worse than yesterday. It's not bleeding anymore, but it's a mixture of swollen, dark lumps and sallow stains of skin.

Carefully, Hannibal tries to adjust Will's red blanket, but before he can pull it aside a bit, in order to see the entirety of Will's face while he sleeps, the younger boy emits a little sniff and opens his eyes.

Hannibal swiftly removes his hand and backs away.

Will yawns, and sits up among the blankets. The force of the sleepy yawn tears up a small wound, and a red blood drop appears on his lower lip while he wipes away some disheveled brown curls from his forehead.

Hannibal sits down a few steps away on the glossy marble surface.

Uttering something in a drowsy mumble, Will turns towards him. He is still avoiding looking Hannibal in the face; he keeps his eyes on Hannibal's ivory pale hands folded on the older boy's knees.

Will asks something in his foreign language, and soon afterwards realizing its futility, the corners of his mouth squirm. With a frown, he seems to consider for a while how he should show the meaning of his question, but then he decides otherwise. He suddenly takes one of the clean blankets, and before Hannibal could move away, Will covers the older boy's legs with it, and then he returns to his place among the rest of the blankets.

Hannibal is sitting with the blanket on his knees, stiff, lips pressed together.

He feels a wave of displeased anger running through him. His reflexes should have been quicker. He should've been able to retreat before Will could get close to him with the blanket.

Normally, Hannibal has no difficulties with reacting timely, but Will somehow holds him spellbound. It's dangerous. Will might have attacked him or done some other harmful things. He should be more careful.

Will twists two blankets around himself, and after finding a comfortable position, he utters with a very low speed, "White." And then, "Red."

Hannibal repeats the two words, and then he gives the names of the two colors in Lithuanian. Will says them after him obediently. They practice a bit. Every time Hannibal speaks, he sees the glimmer of the tiny stars intensify in Will's blue eyes. It's not easy for him to break the silence that protects him from the outside world, but the sparks in Will's irises make up for the unpleasant feeling of being exposed. It's a sort of beauty Hannibal has never seen before.

At one point, Hannibal starts wondering whether Will, with avoiding looking people in the eye, has put up the same defenses Hannibal had with not speaking.

After they repeat the two colors a couple of times, Will suddenly changes his task, and starts practicing Hannibal's name. There is something about it that makes Hannibal suddenly tense. It's too personal. Hearing his name with the clumsy, wavering syllables Will pronounces it... It's just too personal. Too personal...

Hannibal gets up from the floor, pushing the blanket Will gave him aside, and leaves the room with abrupt steps.

"Hanni—" the last syllable freezes on Will's lips when Hannibal pushes the door closed and locks it.

It's more secure outside. He doesn't have that strange, twisting feeling in his stomach he had when he heard Will say his name. It's better off without it.

Hannibal takes a deep breath, and erases the last remnants of the weird tension. He concentrates clearly now.

Choosing a direction, he goes to search for his library. He built a study for himself with tons of books, a big spectacular desk, bronze sculptures with antique motives, shelves, even a ladder and an open upper section with wooden platform. It shows some remarkable similarities to the study his father used to have, though he added some own ideas as well.

As he enters the room, he takes in the familiar smell of furniture polish and old books.

His only disappointment has been that, for some reason, he cannot fill his books with text in his dream palace. He can only create empty pages. So, thousands of books surround him in his study, but they have no real use, they are just empty decorations.

There are certain things he cannot cause to exist in his palace, and imaginary books with content are one of those, as well as food and living creatures. Hannibal always goes to sleep hungry after the small bowl of musty mashed potato and the paper-thin slice of dry bread he gets for supper, but no matter how hard he tries to imagine rich, dainty dishes, he can never bring them into being in his palace. The closest thing to food he could create here was a pot

of painted green salt which has decorating function in the biggest hall. There are some limitations to his capability here, or so it seems.

Now he takes one of the books that has black leather cover, and a pen from the desk, and returns to Will's room. Will is sleeping again, snuggling in the blankets, he doesn't even wake up when the other boy enters the room. Hannibal sits down in the farthest corner from Will, and starts to write words on the first blank page of the book. He lists the two colors he has already learned with Will, and then he adds new ones in Lithuanian. He creates a list of all the basic colors.

Then he decides that he wants to wake Will up. At first, he plans to call Will's name, and his lips make an uncertain stir, but then he changes his mind, and gets up. He shakes Will's shoulder with enough force to disturb his sleep.

Will lets out a pained hiss, and Hannibal surmises that he might have accidentally squeezed a bruise. With little to no remorse, he gives a last firm push, and then steps away from the younger boy while Will rubs his eyes after the brief sleep. Supposedly, Will would need some rest, but Hannibal doesn't mind it. He relentlessly places the book he brought in front of Will on the blankets.

As Will opens the book, the sleepy, watery batting of his eyelashes shows that he can hardly focus. But when he sees the list Hannibal prepared, he shrugs off the drowsiness and sits up, more lively.

Hannibal kneels down opposite him. For a few seconds they watch each other mutely, and then Hannibal points at the golden tassel hanging from the corner of one of Will's blankets, and shows Will the yellow color, slowly pronouncing the Lithuanian name of it, the first one in his list after "red" and "white".

Will repeats it compliantly.

Then Will moves closer with a questioning look on his face, and when Hannibal makes no attempts to stop him, he takes the pen from the older boy, and writes a foreign word next to the Lithuanian one in the black book.

They continue with the other colors. Fortunately, Will's multiple blankets have all kinds of different shades, so they don't have any difficulty with identifying the meaning of the listed words.

When they finish practicing the colors, Will writes some more foreign words under the colors. Hannibal observes, without a stir, how Will starts to teach some new phrases he can show around the room, such as "door", "wall", "blanket" or "pillow".

Each time Hannibal is certain that he understood what exactly Will implies, he adds the Lithuanian name to the corresponding phrase. Then they start to practice the collected words.

After three hours have passed, Hannibal realizes that he enjoys learning with Will more than he should.

He should keep his secure, comfortable silence like he does when he is outside his palace. He definitely should... But it's different when he utters words for Will. It's not real talking, it's a part of studying. And Hannibal is always ready to embrace new knowledge. He likes to improve. And if he is completely honest with himself, there is something more to it. It has something to do with Will, but Hannibal can't really explain it. He somehow longs for Will's presence, and with each word, he can feel a little bit more of it.

However, the half-repressed feeling of making a mistake with letting Will closer doesn't leave. He shouldn't let anyone closer. He shouldn't give up any of his defenses. Being lonely is still better than risking the integrity of his inner strength. He has learned during long years how to solve everything on his own. How to rely on nobody but himself. How to trust nobody but himself. How to learn everything on his own. How to hide secrets deep inside. How to lock everything inside his head. Why try to change this?

And he senses that Will has done the same. Will has also learned how to keep the necessary distances away from the outside world; distances that keep him sane.

They were both safe, behind walls, behind masks, and no one could get to them. Why risk this? Why not just lock Will inside this room forever and leave? Why take even the tiniest step towards each other?

If he wants to end this, he should do it right now, before he reveals anything personal, and before he gets attached. Will already knows his name, saw a room and a corridor of his dream world, some of his weapons, his blankets, the pajamas he is wearing at the orphanage... And spotted the bruises around his wrists. But, probably, Will cannot cause any harm with this vague knowledge if Hannibal locks him in right now and simply leaves him behind. He should just pretend that Will has never been here, that the room is empty, that no one can enter his palace... He should just *pretend*. That shouldn't be hard. He pretended so many times during the past years, so many things, so many veils hiding his true self, so much self-control... He should just *pretend*. Pretend that Will doesn't even exist.

Maybe, if he was decades older, with dozens of years of experience behind him in how to balance between his curiosity and rational carefulness, between inner longing and lurking suspicion, he would be confident enough to risk this. To risk getting closer to Will. His self-assurance would be enough to suppress his doubts. But even if that was the case, it would be heedless and arrogant of him to do so. He shouldn't risk this, period. Not now, and not ever. This is something that he should never be confident enough to risk. And especially now... He has just been learning how to hide all his scars, all the nightmares that live inside his mind. He might be vulnerable to a person who can simply walk inside his head.

And Hannibal also knows that this situation is uncomfortable for Will too, and Will is just trying to make his presence a bit less offensive with his attempts to behave friendly. But this is still easier for Will because Will is the intruder in someone else's mental world. He doesn't have much to lose other than his lonely stability. But Hannibal risks his palace of beauties, his wonderful world, his inside secrets, everything he has... if he tries to communicate with Will. He has too much at stake.

If someone examined only the surface, it would seem that Hannibal is in a winning situation. This is his palace, his mental power, his rules, and Will can be nothing else just a plaything of

Hannibal's decisions. Hannibal can do whatever he wants here. Will is just one item on the list of so many objects building this palace. But deeply, it's not how he feels. A stranger's presence in his own mind makes him wary and uneasy.

An idea starts to develop in Hannibal's head. If he is unable to leave Will behind without any pressure, he'll have to force himself to abandon Will and keep Will far away from him, alone, forever locked in. And the only way to make sure that he can control his attraction towards getting to know Will is if he became one hundred percent sure that Will is a huge danger for him. He'll have to turn Will into a grave threat. Then they'll have no other choice.

Hannibal already has a plan, and he decides that he'll figure out the exact method until tomorrow. His idea doesn't make him happier though. It repels him. But it seems an effective way to solve the problem.

A silent, puffing noise draws his attention back to his surroundings from the whirlpool of ice cold thoughts swirling in his head. Will has climbed back inside the pile of blankets, and is now slumbering peacefully, hugging his cushion with one arm.

Hope

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

As the morning lights wake him up, Will feels a sleepy, but unusually happy smile spreading on his swollen, wounded lips. Hannibal gave some blankets to him! And chose a book for him, and they started learning together! Hannibal took some voluntary steps towards him!

Will can barely believe that this is truly happening to him. He was so lonely, so numb, so close to completely burning out and losing any kind of ability to see the beauty in life... Maybe, it was the question of a day. Maybe after that night a few weeks ago, if he hadn't visited the strange and imposing dream building, he would have fallen into an empty emotional abyss that would have taken away his last chance to ever feel real hope, to ever give a genuine smile, to ever long for human attachments... But there came the glittering white room, the recurring dreams, and Hannibal.

Hannibal is the most interesting part of the whole occurrence. Who is he? Is he just a creation of Will's imagination, or is he real? Will is not sure. His brain has always worked in a strange way: a way no one else could relate to, and no one could really explain. Somehow, it stains his own thoughts with the undertone of other people's inner experiences. He feels them too deep, embedded in his mind, without being able to block them out. Is this what happening when he enters the marble room in his dreams?

Normally, Will doesn't want a thing from other people. It's more than enough to carry the heavy weight of helplessly sharing their suffering, their inward struggling, their suppressed urges, and their shameful sins, and the only way to subdue the maddening chaos is if he doesn't get close. But Hannibal is different. The secret Hannibal locks behind expressionless face, empty dark eyes, and muteness attracts Will's attention. He wants to feel *more*.

He has never really had friends other than his long deceased dog, and the idea of slightly befriendng the mysterious foreign boy in his dreams makes him all excited. He hasn't felt this enthusiastic for at least two or three years.

While he pulls off his dad's old t-shirt he tends to use as nightwear, and splashes some cold water from under the running tap onto his bruises, he relives the moments when he opened the black leather-covered book and saw the list of colors Hannibal had prepared for him. It was when he truly understood that Hannibal was willing to continue the idea Will had started, and wanted to learn more.

Will realizes that he is smiling again. A happy, stupid grin on his face, so unusual of him. He rarely smiles, and when he does, it's mostly just a bitter, cynical grimace: a sarcastic

contortion of his lips; acknowledging that something bad has happened again, or a sign of embarrassment, if he feels utterly uncomfortable. But this time, his smile is full of anticipation and light-hearted hopes. Perhaps, Hannibal is going to help him forget about his real world and explore a sanctuary of dreams. It would be so nice... He can hardly think about anything else.

In spite of his still sharply aching wounds, he has to go to school today because there will be a Math test, so he puts his uniform on and collects his school bag.

He doesn't mind the pain of his bruises and the cold wind hitting him as he steps outside the large concrete building, because he fantasizes about teaching Hannibal and learning some new words with him, and none of the outside world's nuisances can get to him.

While he is at school, he even prepares a lesson for Hannibal on one of the blank pages of an exercise book.

He estimates that they will have about six hours during the night between falling asleep in his storage room and waking up, so he creates a tiny schedule for that time frame how they can spend those hours with the most useful things. He feels bad about falling asleep in Hannibal's room last time, but he couldn't help it; his head injury made him drowsy and disoriented. Now he feels much stronger, and wants to spend all the time he'll have with Hannibal. He leaves a three-hour gap empty, in case Hannibal might have his own ideas how to progress with their learning. During his own three hours, Will plans to teach a bunch of new basic words and a little bit more complicated things: some sentences about their circumstances, like how to express being cold, feeling tired, or having painful bruises.

After school, he cleans the dishes at the coffee shop and furtively crawls inside the garage to check the new boat his father has repaired. When he finishes his usual tasks, he goes back to their attic.

His dad is already home, sitting on the couch, watching a baseball championship. There is a liquor bottle standing next to his right leg. The creased collar of his blue trucker jacket partially covers his bearded, sharp chin and the bitter, crooked line of his mouth.

"I sold a netful of crabs." That's all he says as a short, hoarse greeting. He keeps his bleary eyes on the TV screen without even looking up at his son.

The statement earns no reply from Will, just an ephemeral pull of his eyebrows.

"Take the money, it's in the pocket of my jacket," his father adds. "You can buy some lunch tomorrow at school. And what about the note-pad you mentioned a few weeks ago that you needed for your classes? You can buy that as well."

Without speaking, Will sits down in his storage room to do his homework. He doesn't search for the money because he knows that his dad would take it back in a couple of hours anyway. He'll need it to buy some more booze at the pub – his bottle has been almost empty.

Will tries to concentrate on his homework, but his thoughts always spiral back to Hannibal.

If he thinks of the words Hannibal uttered for him in his low, subdued mumble, of the secretive coldness in Hannibal's dark eyes, or of the reserved, but irrepressible curiosity in Hannibal's posture, his heart starts jumping in his chest with crazy speed. He can't wait to see the other boy again.

His head is so full of excited happiness because of Hannibal that he feels like he has to share it with someone.

After some moments of hesitation, he gets up, puts his homework aside, and with small, uncertain steps, approaches the TV, the couch and his father. Nervous tension lingering in his motions, he folds his hands in front of his lap, casting his eyes on his locked fingers.

"Dad?"

His father watches the TV screen for a few more seconds and turns towards his son only afterwards. "What is it?"

"Dad, I met a... a foreign... girl." Will shifts his weight from one leg to the other uncomfortably while uttering the lie, but for some unknown reason, it feels more appropriate to phrase the whole case as if Hannibal were a girl, though he doesn't have the faintest idea why. "And she is... she is very special. She is somewhat taller than me, and willowy, and she has blonde hair and dark eyes... A rare combination. And she seems smart, but doesn't talk at all. And she has been a little bit kind to me. I think I want to be friends with her."

His dad keeps his bloodshot eyes on his son for a while, and then takes a gulp from the bottle. After making a loud slurp when swallowing some liquor, he asks, "Have you fucked her yet?"

Will feels his heart miss a beat. His stomach churns by the disrespectful tone of the question, and he needs a few seconds before he can stammer out some shaky words. "I just met her."

"So, have you fucked her or not?"

"No," Will answers with a hot flush of red appearing on his cheeks. "She is very... beautiful. She is not..."

He can't continue because his dad interrupts him with the bitter bark of a laughter. "Beautiful, eh? It's one more reason why you should fuck her." He drinks a big gulp from the bottle again before he continues speaking, "You know how to do that, don't you?"

Will's face is already burning. "I know what sex is," he bumbles.

"No need to worry, then. Just fuck her quickly, be careful not to promise her anything, and you'll be fine."

"She is not like that!"

His dad snorts with disgust. "Some nagging, stuck-up priss then? That's no good, I'm telling you, no good. Forget her. You'll find better ones, you still have time. How old are you? Sixteen?"

“Fourteen.”

“I was fifteen when I first fucked the neighbor’s daughter. She was eighteen. We were drinking beer in the backseat of her parents’ car, and... You know, the whole thing went quickly. It wasn’t a big deal. I can’t even remember her name.” He drinks some more from the bottle. “Have you tried the neighbor’s daughters here? They seem okay to me, though the one with the black locks might be a bit too skinny. Try the brown one, she has one hell of an ass. If I were younger...”

Will turns and shambles back into his storage room. He decides that he doesn’t feel like trying to talk about Hannibal any more.

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Even though his father’s crude words seemed brusque to Will, and, moreover, hurtful, they cannot stop him from brightening a little when he finishes his homework and has time to think about Hannibal again.

Maybe he shouldn’t have said that Hannibal was a girl. It’s his fault that his dad misinterpreted the situation and ended up talking about Hannibal in such a degrading manner. Perhaps, he should try to bring this topic up again, a few days later, calling Hannibal a boy and explaining in detail that what he hopes to develop is a vague friendship and not a date. And with this conclusion, Will shrugs off the unpleasant reminiscence of his dad’s remarks, and starts to complete the lesson he drafted for Hannibal while he was at school.

He hopes that he can carry the piece of paper with him to the dream palace. He hasn’t tried to purposely bring anything with him before, but now he wants to attempt it. He tears the page from his exercise book, and puts it in the pocket of one of his dad’s old t-shirt. He chooses to wear the one with a pocket tonight, and he hopes he will manage to get his writing into the dream world.

His only problem is that he is so excited that he can barely rest, no matter how tired he feels after he cleaned the bigger room around midnight when his father returned from the pub and coughed spurts of vomit across the floor. Will has to lie awake for almost two hours before he can finally fall asleep. He is close to thinking that he will never be able to get back to Hannibal’s white room, but then – all at once - he sees the lights of the marble room appear.

Looking around with a brisk smile, Will searches for the pile of blankets, but he can’t find it. His warm blankets and pillows are missing, and there’s no sign of Hannibal either. It’s just the glimmering white walls that surrounds him.

Will lets out a displeased sniff, and then sits down in his usual corner to wait for Hannibal. He still has the piece of paper in the pocket of his t-shirt, so he prepares it and sets it next to his trembling, pale feet on the floor. He impatiently watches the door, hoping that Hannibal is going to arrive soon. After waiting for this the whole day, he wants to use every minute to get to know Hannibal and his strange language, and learn some new things.

At last, he can hear the sound of approaching steps, so he lifts his head up with vigor.

After the familiar sharp clinks of the lock, the door opens, and Hannibal is standing there in his usual gray pajamas, barefoot. In his right hand, he keeps the dagger he didn't bring yesterday when he gave Will the new blankets and the black book. And he doesn't just have the silvery dagger now, but also holds a bundle of ropes in the other hand.

Will tilts his head, gawking at the ropes.

Hannibal walks up to him with quick, yet composed steps, and presses the blade of the dagger against the smaller boy's throat. Will suspects that this means that Hannibal wants him to remain motionless, and since he has not much idea what to do anyway, he stays stationary, still gaping at the older boy's hands.

Hannibal takes one of the ropes, puts it around Will's upper body, and with a few strong, determined motions, ties Will so tightly that Will can't move his arms from his side, not even half an inch.

Somewhere, deep in his heart, Will hopes that this is just some weird example, with the help of which Hannibal wants to demonstrate the meaning of some new expressions he would like to teach. This beam of hope is the dumbest thing Will has ever felt, and he knows it, and yet, it glows in his heart and keeps him from thinking anything else.

Hannibal double-checks the tightness of the rope and the firmness of its hold, and then he takes a second rope and ties Will's ankles together. Afterwards, he inspects the knots with cold accuracy; his dark eyes show nothing but calculated precision and deliberation.

For a moment, Will looks him in the face and only sees empty coldness; then the younger boy blinks nervously and turns to watch the marble floor. Hannibal checks the rope around Will's legs one last time, and then gets up and leaves, locking the door behind him.

Will tries to shift into a more comfortable angle so that he can brace his back against the flat wall, not the inclination of the corner. After managing it, he attempts to guess what Hannibal is going to show with this. Is he planning to teach some phrases about freedom? Or captivity... or discomfort... or ropes?

The door opens again, and Hannibal re-enters the marble room. He carries some clanking metal objects wrapped up in blue silk. With an aimed push, he places the parcel in front of Will on the floor, which causes the silk fabric to open and slide off on the side of the metal items. Will can see now that Hannibal brought some more blades - two daggers and a dozen smaller knives. And a pair of silvery scissors.

Will gulps, and pulls his tied legs closer to his trunk so that they can get to a safer distance from the sharp objects.

With his unevenly cut, pale mops of hair hanging in front of his forehead like an ashen, ragged veil, Hannibal kneels beside the blades, and gently runs his white fingertips on the clean metal surfaces, examining which one to choose. Then he takes one of the smaller knives and turns to Will.

Dark eyes, calm and blank, he is scrutinizing Will now, as if Will was a piece of meat to cut into chunks and he was searching for the proper point to start.

And then Will suddenly accepts what's about to happen, and the anticipating happiness he felt the whole day ultimately turns into vacant emptiness. He closes his eyes and gives a disenchanted, sour half-smile, letting his surroundings fall behind a wall of darkness.

Torture

Chapter Notes

Explicit imagery of canon-typical violence.

Hannibal expected Will to have an abrupt panic attack when seeing the blades, or at least to show some usual signs of growing fear, but Will has just turned his head away, eyes closed, disillusioned, bitter emptiness blanching his complexion. He doesn't even look shocked, rather sickened with sadness and tired from numb disappointment.

For a moment, the knife stops in the air, and Hannibal watches the smaller boy's face. He wishes he could put his palm to Will's wan cheeks and give him a brief caress to make the listless pain disappear, if only for a moment. Just for one moment...

But he subdues the urge, and then continues his motion with the knife, with the same precision and determination as before. In order to gain access to Will's shoulder, he turns the left sleeve of Will's shabby t-shirt up. Afterwards, he gives a few taps to the smaller boy's flat triceps at different spots, considering the proper place to start. His goal is to choose a point where he won't exert any prolonged effect, but he can cause enough pain to really torture the younger boy. Paying attention to avoid the major lines of tendons and veins, he decides where to start.

And then he slides the blade into Will's flesh, making a small cut first. It's not too serious - Will might have already felt much worse - but deep enough to draw a hiss of pain from him and send streams of blood down his arm.

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The blade runs in and out of his flesh as if it was a needle sewing ragged clothes. Blood is bubbling, red jets are springing in the air... The small knife doesn't dive deeper than two inches but causes unbearable pain: it's burning Will's upper arm like fire. Hannibal injures only his left arm, and only the fleshed parts connecting his shoulder to his elbow, and at the beginning, Will considers this a good sign, hoping that maybe he will get out of this nightmare in one piece, but after the twelfth little stab - a few of them dip into already existing cuts - he wishes that Hannibal would cause him more pain or mutilate him in worse ways, so long as he just stopped hurting his already aching arm.

Once, there is a pause, and Will tentatively opens his eyes, letting out a tormented, broken moan.

Hannibal is kneeling in front of him, holding the silvery blade in the air, blood dripping from it in red lines down onto the floor. The older boy watches Will with a dead stare as if showing him, “Look what I’m capable of doing to you, look at who I really am.”

Then he continues. The knife slides into Will’s upper arm again, splitting an older violet bruise into two.

When Hannibal must have come to the conclusion that he had cut and pierced enough wounds to turn Will’s arm into an explosion of seething blood and shooting pain, he stops again. Will keeps his eyes shut tight most of the time; he just makes a few watery blinks now to apprehend his surroundings.

He can see as Hannibal wipes the blood-covered knife into the blue silk, and then puts it on the soft fabric, getting up and heading for the door. For some reason, the older boy leaves.

Will lifts his head up. Hannibal’s steps grew fainter as he walks along the corridor, away from the marble room. A chance to do something! Will instantly swallows back his pain, and pushes himself from the wall in the direction of the blades.

Despite the burning aches, despite the fact that his head is spinning from the sight of blood running everywhere, and despite his painfully tight ropes, Will manages to gradually drag his body on his knees a few inches to the left, in order to reach the pile of sharp metal objects. He turns so that he can touch them with one of his strongly tied hands.

He is just about to pull a knife towards him with the fluttering tips of his fingers, but right in this moment, the door opens again, and Hannibal returns.

Before Will could grab the blade, Hannibal has already landed next to him as fast as a carnivore jumping towards its prey, and quickly kicks the knife away from the smaller boy’s trembling clutch. Will draws a disappointed little sigh.

As he hangs his head wearily; he can spot a line of redness appear on the lower side of Hannibal’s white foot, and he infers that the blade must have cut the older boy because of the force of the sudden kick. For a moment, Will almost forgets about his own pain, and a wince crosses his face, thinking of the sharp burn of the cut on Hannibal’s sole, but then his own suffering overwhelms him again.

He is only able to breathe, “Red,” in a forceless, tremulous whisper.

Hannibal’s eyes flash at his own feet, and he must realize what Will meant... The wound.

Hannibal’s expression freezes because of hearing Will speak a word they learned together, but it’s just a split second pause, and the next moment, the older boy has the same slack equanimity on his features as before.

He doesn’t pay any more attention to his bleeding foot – he grabs Will by the shoulder instead, and pushes him firmly back into the corner to his former place.

And then the reason Hannibal left the room is revealed. He keeps something in his left hand: he brought a decorative, round pot filled with green salt, which he is setting now beside the knives and the blue fabric.

Will struggles hard to stop his mind from working. He is trying not to imagine what Hannibal is intending to do with the salt. Not to make any guesses...

But with or without guessing, he is forced to face the truth as Hannibal dips his fingers into the green mass of tiny crystals, and lets his palm become covered with salt. When his fingers are already green from the pieces of salt stuck on them, he removes his hand from the pot and approaches the smaller boy.

Will turns his head away, a second before the older boy presses the coarse salt from his palm into Will's wounds with relentless force.

If Will thought his wounds were too sore, he realizes in an instant that the pain can get much worse. Wherever Hannibal squeezes the salt into the gashes, his arm burns as sharply as if glowing ember was pressed against skin, in between the torn lines of flesh, stinging like acid in open cuts... Warm beads crossing the shivery skin of his cheeks, dripping from his chin, tickling his neck, mingling with the ice cold air of the room – Will feels tears of pain running down his cheeks. He is not really crying, it's more like a desperate outburst of agony.

And when he truly believes this can't get any worse, Hannibal takes one of the blades in his blood- and -green-paint-covered hand, and cuts Will's upper arm with it again.

Four small incisions. They are tracing out a small, rectangular shape on Will's shoulder.

Desperate, choking wheezes break forth from Will's lungs. He starts to believe that if the pain won't get alleviated, he is going to lose his mind.

Right then, Hannibal stops and keeps his eyes on the square of cuts for a few long seconds.

And then he drives the knife back to Will's shoulder, and with a firm tug, stripes off the rectangular piece of skin marked and surrounded by the four previous cuts. Will cries out from the sudden wave of pain. The older boy takes the scissors from the silk, and cuts through the small fragments of tissue still holding the piece of skin, freeing it.

Will feels his inwards lift as he sees the small square of white skin hanging from the tip of the scissors, thin red lines rushing towards the floor from under the pale fragment.

And then Hannibal takes the piece of skin between two fingers, and slowly moves it in his own direction. When Will realizes what the older boy is about to do, he quickly shuts his eyes, but it's too late: he has already been forced to take in the sight of Hannibal calmly putting the blood-leaking skin fragment in his mouth and starting to chew it with a few paced, leisured motions of his jaw.

A horrified yelp leaves Will's sallow lips. The only thing he wishes for is to erase the picture from his head right after seeing it, but he can't; moreover, he can even hear soft, wet sounds witnessing the fact that Hannibal chews on the piece of skin a bit more forcefully.

Suddenly, everything turns unstable and shaky, and Will hears his own tormented, faltering exhalations echo in his ears. This is too much... Too much... He wants to open his eyes, but he can only see blackness. The pain fluctuates, his head is reeling...

And the next moment, he falls on the marble floor, unconscious.

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Disorderly curls sticking above Will's closed, blood-stained eyelids, the younger boy is lying on his side, motionless. Hannibal swallows the salty, metallic-tasting fragment of raw skin he has managed to chew into three pieces, and then pulls closer and examines whether Will has lost consciousness indeed or is just exhausted from pain. When he sees no signs of Will being aware, and makes sure that Will won't apprehend what's going on around him, the silvery scissors fall onto the floor from his hand with a silent jingle.

Slow and uncertain, Hannibal shifts his blood-covered hand in Will's direction. His fingers pause in the air, a few inches away from the smaller boy's forehead, hesitating. Now that Will can't see him anymore, and there's no use pretending, Hannibal cannot re-create the calm, cold precision and determination he had when torturing Will. He suddenly feels lonely. Lonely, in a way he has never felt before. Or maybe only once, after his sister's death.

He has just killed his chance to ever have Will by his side. Will is never going to be able to forget what happened tonight, and he is going to despise Hannibal for the rest of his life. There's no room for any further attempts to ever behave friendly towards each other, because it would be a lie. Now he has created an enemy from Will, and there must be nothing else left in Will, but disgusted hatred. It is what Hannibal wanted, and he has surely attained his goal. Now it's time to leave.

But for a minute, he can't get up because he feels too nauseated. When he caused any kind of pain to people who deserved it according to his own opinion, or even if he just imagined making them suffer, it was a source of deep pleasure; at least as alluring and enjoyable as eating an exquisite dish served at his parents' castle. But torturing Will was like being forced to eat a bowl of rotten food. Like swallowing bites of stained, soupy pulp, which is reeking, dripping discolored fluids, and maggots are hanging from it. It was repulsive, sickening and pointless. And causing Will more pain was like stuffing more and more bites of the foul, revolting meal into his own mouth, inflicting more and more unnecessary nausea and aversion on himself. He has to take a couple of big breaths now to suppress the unpleasant abhorrence.

He wishes that they'd never had to go through this.

Finally, he lets his fingers slide into Will's tousled hair, and gently gives a small stroke to the unconscious boy's head. Will's body is convulsing with pain.

When his sister had a fever and couldn't sleep because of the unnatural waves of cold shaking her limbs, Hannibal was sitting beside her on the side of the bed. And now, as he runs his fingers along Will's nape, he thinks of his sister and how he stroked her forehead to

comfort her. He can clearly remember that the small girl stopped whimpering only when he told her a bedtime story.

So Hannibal pulls his hand back, and sits right beside Will on the marble floor. Throwing glimpses at the unhealthy pallor of the unconscious boy's face, he inhales-exhales slowly for a while to ease his growing discomfort. He prepares himself to do something that makes him unusually tense. He needs a few more seconds he spends breathing in silence, after which he feels a bit more secure and clears his throat softly.

And then, his mouth stirs, and he starts murmuring in Lithuanian. The same fairy tale he once told his little sister to make her feel better. First, his words are slow, uncertain and tentative because of his voice being unused for so long, but then the sentences grow longer, and he gains more and more confidence. The story is about three princes and some animals that follow them to help them along their adventures. The tale is not one of the happiest ones, but it was his sister's favorite because of the many different types of animals appearing in it, so he chose this one to comfort her that night, and he tells it to the unconscious boy now to help him get better.

When Hannibal finishes the tale, he makes a long slide with his left palm to stroke Will's head once more before he gets up.

It's high time that he left, because Will's breathing starts to turn louder and less even, indicating that the younger boy is close to regaining consciousness.

Hannibal mechanically takes a knife from the ground, and then, with a couple of quick, firm drags of the blade, he cuts Will's ropes through.

He locks the door behind him when he leaves with the tools he brought.

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Hannibal doesn't just lock Will's door, but also the door of the whole corridor, and the other two corridors leading there, and three more doors that could mean access to the part Will's room is located in. After thoroughly locking all of them, he takes the keys as well as the paper Will wrote their next lesson on. He keeps ignoring the pain the accidental cut he suffered when kicking away the knife from Will causes with every step he takes.

He carries the keys to his favorite balcony, where he stops at the edge of the glossy, white stone slabs.

And then he flings the keys over the balustrade, into the endless abyss of the eternal starry night surrounding his palace. They disappear in the black nothing.

Then he takes the black book he started to write their studied words in, and throws it into the vacant darkness after the keys. He also creases the piece of paper Will scribbled their next lesson on, and lets it fall into the night too.

There are few more things left he needs to get rid of. He goes to one of the bedrooms he used to bring Will's blankets and cushions from. Will's red blanket embroidered with golden yarn rests in the middle of the big double bed, where Hannibal tossed it after removing it from Will's room. It probably became Will's favorite, because he used it as his main blanket also the second night, when he already got a lot of other blankets too. It still has Will's dark stains of blood on it from the nose bleeding.

Walking back to the balcony with the red blanket, Hannibal wants to throw it away too. He takes a step towards the parapet, but then he just stands there, embracing the red fabric to his chest with both arms.

His fingers make a hesitant stir, and he can't stop them from starting to instinctively stroke the blanket.

And then he just stares into the black night, holding the blanket tight against his chest.

Biting

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Will emits a pained growl as the sharp sunlight darts in through the holes on the roof and unpleasantly heats his closed eyelids, burning away the last fragments of sleep. He has spent the last three days on top of the boxes in his storage room under blankets, with a high fever. He cannot sleep for longer than one or two hours because of his aching wounds, so he hasn't visited the marble room after the torture.

Will suspects that his ill weakness and the fever are caused by the fact that his shoulder wounds are badly infected, which is no wonder after Hannibal pressed non-sterilized blades, salt treated with who-knows-what kind of chemicals, and his own soiled fingers into the open cuts.

Now Will's dad works in the garage day and night so that he can get enough money to take his son to a doctor next week. Last evening, he even skipped the few hours he always spends at the pub, just to be able to get up earlier the next morning and continue working. Obviously, he is not particularly pleased with their situation, and grumbles curses at his son every time he arrives home.

Will feels ashamed of being such a burden. And it just makes things even worse that he can't tell the truth about his wounds. He had to tell his father that he tripped on a sleeping homeless guy and fell into a broken beer bottle in a littered, narrow passageway when he went down in the evening to check if the grocery store was still open, trying to buy some bread. It was the only plausible explanation he managed to fabricate. Fortunately, the impossible timeline of events – namely the fact that Will didn't have the ghastly wounds when his dad arrived home from the pub late at night, only in the following morning – doesn't catch his father's attention. He was too drunk that night to realize whether Will had been wounded or not.

The only suspicious circumstance - which also made his dad furious - is that Will was lying on his mattress on top of the boxes without any bandages, soaking everything with blood during his sleep. Will tried to mutter something about losing his consciousness before he could put anything around the wounds, but his dad gave him an angry slap, just to make sure that his son was sorry enough. And he also didn't forget to mention at least ten times how much the new mattress he had to buy instead of the blood-soiled one had cost. Will keeps listening to the laments wordlessly.

He is not sure how it is possible that he has the dream wounds in real life, too. Perhaps, the palace is not wholly a dream but closer to reality? But how? And... and does that mean that

Hannibal is real too? The thought makes Will's heart leap. Somehow, the question whether the luxurious objects, the fine marble room and the majestic corridors are a dream or not doesn't interest him. He only wants to know if Hannibal is real.

There's a blunt noise of wood as the front door opens, and the shuffling steps of his dad become audible. Will can hear as the man growls cusses about his son again while wiping off some dirt from his shoes into the doormat. He soon enters Will's room in his rain-dripping, brown leather jacket and mud-splashed jeans.

"I managed to get you some antibiotics," he rasps, then places a bottle of white capsules and a tube of antibiotic cream in front of his son onto the blankets. "Er, don't mention this to anyone, okay?"

Will blinks with surprise. "How did you get these without prescription?"

"That's not your concern. Just take two pills a day and put the other thing on the cuts." He also brings Will a paper cup of water, and sets it next to the storage boxes.

"Dad, did you do something illegal?"

"You ask too many questions. You should rest now, and I'll return to the garage. We'll go to the doctor on Monday."

"Okay, thanks." Will grabs the paper cup of water beside his new mattress, and takes one pill with a gulp of water.

"Try to sleep now."

"Can I have one more question?"

"Well, then. Go ahead."

"Years ago, when I first tried to stroke my dog's head, she bit my hand and ran away." Will gives a sad smile as he recalls the memory. "Do people do the same?"

"Yeah, it happens sometimes."

"Why?"

His dad is already on his way towards the door, he just throws his answer back over his shoulder, "Why did your dog attack you?"

"She was scared of letting me closer. She had been hurt a lot, and her heart was full of suspicion. It was safer for her to be alone because she was so strong: she didn't need any help to get along."

"That's the same in the case of some people. Now try to sleep."

"Dad?" Will shifts under the blanket. "How can I make someone believe that I'm on their side?"

“Try to be nice; there’s not much else you can do. Do the same thing you do when you make friends.”

Will contorts his lips into a small grimace. “I don’t have any friends.”

“Maybe, because you also bite and run.”

“I guess so,” Will mutters, nervously starting to crease the bandages around his upper arm.

“But... this time, I have to convince someone that I can be trusted. I... I have to make it look like... like I’m friendly. I don’t have any other choice.”

“Think of your dog, then. How were you able to tame her?”

Will wrinkles his nose, deliberating his father’s words for a while, and then his face lights up.

“Thanks, dad, I’ve got an idea.”

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Hannibal spends hours behind a desk in the library. He is allowed to visit the library twice a week together with the other orphans, under the guidance of an employee of the institute, and he always uses the opportunity to get as far from the gray, dirty dormitory and shadow-filled, cold corridors of the orphanage as possible.

The library is small and seedy, but at least people don’t bother him here. The other orphans all sit in the room that contains entertaining literature, and Hannibal can stay alone among the bookshelves that hold scientific books. He has spent the last two occasions near the linguistic section, studying English. He assumed that Will was from some kind of English-speaking territory, because the book he had once read and included the name ‘Will’ was an American novel, and after checking the words he learned with Will in a Lithuanian–English dictionary, he saw that he was right: Will taught him English indeed. So now, Hannibal makes notes from the dictionary for himself, and he spends his free time at the orphanage learning the English words he records at the library.

He has started to study English three days after Will’s disappearance. Actually, Will didn’t disappear, he must still be locked up in the empty marble room, but whenever Hannibal inwardly refers to Will’s captivity, he always labels it a disappearance. Will is not supposed to be in the palace, so he should be considered being outside the building. He is not really there anymore... He is out of reach.

Hannibal tells himself that the reason he has started learning English is to get something useful out of the brief time he spent with Will. And yes, this would be a plausible explanation if he didn’t spend most of the time of his studying constantly imagining how Will would explain the new words to him. But he does, and it makes him suspect that he is lying to himself about doing something useful. He is simply missing the chance he lost when hurting Will, and no matter how important it would be to be neutral about it, he is still feeling that strange and deep-rooted loneliness he felt after torturing Will.

One evening, six days after Will's disappearance, while he sits on the side of his bed, he pulls one knee up against his chest and absent-mindedly touches the half-healed cut on his sole he suffered when kicking the knife away from Will.

He can still hear Will's breathed word, "Red," and it makes his exhalations slightly quicken as he recollects it.

With a sudden motion, he tears the wound open with his fingernails. He wants the gash to remain the way it was when he was with Will in the marble room.

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After the second week, Hannibal can't hold back any longer. He has banned himself so far to visit Will's part, but now he allots himself thirty minutes to spend at the outer door which is locking the corridors leading to Will's room. Half an hour is an insignificant, short frame of time - he reassures himself. It's just an innocent little pleasure he can allow himself. Why not? He won't even hear Will's breathing from that distance. He won't even know if Will is there... if Will is alive... It's really nothing to be concerned about.

But he still feels a bit bad about this decision, and for one simple reason: he is unable to explain to himself why exactly it is so important to him to visit that part of the building, if it's truly insignificant...

He suppresses his doubts, and lets the excitement grow in his heart as he approaches the first locked door blocking the way to Will's room. He carries an antique cuckoo clock from another room, and sets it on a round, carved coffee table next to him so that he can check the time. And then he wants to lean against the wooden slab of the door and spend his thirty minutes standing with his eyes closed, as close to Will's room as physically possible, but he freezes in a sudden.

The door handle is missing! There's only a round, dark hole in the wooden material where the handle should be.

With very careful, low speed, Hannibal gives a push to the door with his right palm, and it opens with no resistance. On the other side, the lock and the door handle are lying on the clean, shiny floor, surrounded by bolts and screws and other small metal assemblies. Will dismantled the lock!

In an instant, Hannibal realizes his own irresponsible stupidity. If Will could get a piece of paper with him into the palace, the same way, he could have brought other objects during the past two weeks, for example a screwdriver. And the smell of machine oil drifting from Will's hair must have been a warning sign of the fact that Will has at least a basic knowledge of mechanical structures...

And now Will is free, and he can be hiding anywhere in the huge palace...

Hannibal takes a few seconds, standing in the half-open door petrified, listening to the empty silence of the building, holding his breath. He can't hear a single noise, and after letting out a

slow exhalation, he takes a step inside. After the step, he stands still, listening again. When he can't hear anything this time either, he steps again as silently as possible, and then listens again. He also tries to recognize any familiar smell that could indicate if Will is near, but he can't. There's a tone of scent in the air that resembles of fish, but not that disgusting, heavy smell of raw fish Will had been stinking of: it's milder and less apparent. Will might have already left these parts.

Tiptoeing, Hannibal quietly retreats from the corridor, and goes to a nearby room. He takes one of his butterfly swords from the wall, and holding the weapon in front of himself, he enters Will's part of the building again.

There's still dead silence.

He inches along the first corridor, just to see the dismantled parts of another locking device as he reaches the next door that was supposed to hold Will captive. While he tries to listen to any suspicious sign with all of his senses, he gently presses the second door, opening it. Each step he takes is shorter and slower, and more careful. He leaves all the doors behind, and finally reaches the empty marble room.

There, the door is ajar. Hannibal can still see no trace of Will's presence, but something has been changed in the marble room. Will pulled the ebony bench from the corridor into the room, and left it in the middle of the emptiness. First, Hannibal sees no reason for this change of furniture arrangement, but then he detects a paper bag placed on the bench. Will has left something for him in the middle of the room, displaying it.

Hannibal spends three long minutes standing without a stir, smelling the air, trying to catch even the slightest noises, and having a good look at every inch of his surroundings... And only after he is one hundred percent sure that Will is not nearby, he takes a few steps towards the bench and the paper bag.

He circles around the piece of furniture, meticulously checking that there isn't anything dangerous hiding around or under it, and then gives a poke to the paper bag with the tip of his butterfly sword.

Neither the sounds of metal parts clanking nor the jingling of glass shards can be heard, so probably there's nothing sharp inside, but to make sure, he gently jabs at the paper bag four more times with the blade. It's just the silent rustling of paper audible.

With a frown of concentration on his forehead, situating himself as far from the package as possible, he extends his arms and slides the very tip of the sword into the gap of the paper bag, opening it.

Basically, he expects something wicked to spring out, but all that happens is that - in an instant - warm, almost tormenting-delicious scents of fresh food fill the air.

Mesmerized, drawn by the irresistible temptation, Hannibal unwittingly steps closer to the paper bag, and what he sees inside makes his heart miss a beat. He has found a couple of fried fish sticks and a bread roll!

Will has somehow managed to bring his own dinner into the dream world, and has given it to him.

Food

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Hannibal feels the painful flames of hunger suddenly burning in his stomach. His fingers strain around the hilt of the butterfly sword as the smell of the freshly fried, golden-brown fish fills his nostrils. Will brought him dinner! And considering how ill-fed and unkempt Will looked, it's almost one hundred percent sure that this is Will's own dinner here - he can't have a lot of food to share.

There is a moment when Hannibal believes that he won't be able to hold back; he'll jump to the paper bag and shove the food into his mouth... But he manages to stay composed. It takes all his willpower to stand there, watch the meal without a stir, pointing at it with the sword, while his whole body seems to be saturated with the warm, fresh scent of oil frying and crunchy fish and bread.

There are rats living in the water lines of the orphanage, and sometimes, Hannibal sees the groundskeeper placing traps for them. The groundskeeper dips bread slices in poison, and leaves them in the corners of the building for two or three days so that the rats would find them.

Hannibal thinks of the rats now as he keeps looking at the food.

Probably, he should leave the paper bag untouched, and retreat, starting to search for Will in the palace. His top priority should be to hunt Will down, and then he might consider what to do with the dinner.

But the hunt might take days, weeks, or even months – it's highly unlikely that he can finish it tonight. The palace is huge, and if Will is careful enough, it might be close to impossible to corner him, let alone incapacitate him. Moreover, Will might have weapons too. A quick dinner is not too much of a delay before Hannibal begins the long and dangerous search for the smaller boy.

Hannibal steps to the paper bag, and grabs it by one corner. He can hear the impatient growl of his stomach, but he still has to restrain his hunger. After contemplating all possibilities, he has concluded that he has to find a room where he can barricade the door and can hide inside in case the food is poisoned and weakens him or narcotizes him. Otherwise, Will might be able to get close to him and kill him while Hannibal is under the influence of the venoms infiltrating the meal. He must be careful. Very careful. Just one or two breadcrumbs first, tiny pieces of fish, and then half-hour-long pauses between each bite. That should work, even if there's deadly poison in the food – he'll discover the danger before he eats too much.

Hannibal chooses the room he brought the butterfly sword from: it has only one entrance and contains many heavy, glass-walled cabinets displaying ancient weapons. There are also some more swords hanging on the walls. It can be reasonably expected that he'll be able to defend himself there, no matter how strong the poisons are and what kind of tools Will has acquired to break into the room.

He locks the door behind him twice, then pulls three glass cabinets to the entrance to completely block it. After he estimates that it's impossible to move the huge weight closing off the door, he can finally let his knees sag, and half-falling-half-sitting down on the Persian rug covering the floor of the room, he tears the paper bag open with eager, insuppressible hunger shaking his fingers, and chooses a fish stick.

He eats one bite of it.

His original plan is to wait half an hour and check whether he shows any sign of poisoning before progressing with the eating, but as the still slightly warm, crispy bite of food melts in his mouth, it makes him so hungry that he is unable to control his starvation. The instinct to ease the constant rabid hunger grows unbearably strong, and he simply can't care about poisons any more.

Suddenly, it seems to him that even if the meal is full of lethal venoms causing him unimaginable pain and spasms, it's still worth it. The animalistic urge tortures him and presses him to push every caution aside, and after two minutes of tormenting slow waiting, he grasps the bread roll and a handful of fish sticks, and starts to eat.

His meal gets finished in a flash, and then he is just sitting there, breathing silently but a bit faster than usual, keeping his eyes longingly on the empty paper bag.

Hannibal is not sure that he could despise himself more because of his irresponsibility, but as the aching hunger starts to dissolve after the sudden amount of food consumed, he slowly becomes less tense.

The dinner was delicious, and all he feels is pleasant satisfaction, and not the intensifying convulsions of deadly poison. Time passes, and there are no suspicious symptoms at all. Finally, he starts to let his worries go, and leans his head backwards to support it by the wall, closing his eyes.

He thinks of his family. The last time he ate something warm and comforting like this was at home, with his parents. *Home...* Now, as he recalls the familiar softness of his old bed, the play of colors on the wings of the elusive butterflies chasing each other from flower to flower in their garden, the silent tunes of a violin drifting from a distant room, numb sadness fills his heart. He realizes that, perhaps, he'll never find a place he can call home again. His reality with all its ugliness is going to trap him forever in a world of monsters, disgusting abjections, and unsalvageable imperfectness. He'll never be able to see the pure beauty that had surrounded his childhood before everything collapsed.

But he doesn't let self-pity embitter the reminiscence of his family. He thinks of the times when they still had their castle, their wealth, and their dignity, and the joyful, untroubled laughter of his little sister echoes in his head. Back then, he never once experienced what real

hunger was... But now he knows, and he has grown strong enough to face all the abominations of the real world he didn't know a thing about years ago.

At once, his eyes flash open and he leaves the gloomy aching of the memories behind.

Pushing the paper bag aside, he gets up, takes the butterfly sword again, and sets out to track Will down.

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Hannibal cannot find Will that night. Yet, he has to admit to himself that he is neither disappointed nor angry because of it. Somehow the interesting challenge of searching for the smaller boy around his palace has given him pleasant excitement. In a sense, it has reminded him of playing hide-and-seek with his sister years ago; it's just much more real and challenging this time, and stirs his blood with fresh thrills.

And the next night, when he appears in his palace and tries to follow some scents to look for anything suspicious, he finds a new paper bag at another place of the corridors, set on a cupboard. This time Will has left him two slices of blueberry pie. The following day, Will places grilled eggplant for him on a bookshelf, the day after that, a couple of chocolate cakes wait for him on top of a wooden crate.

Each time, Hannibal can see the logo of a coffee shop on the paper bags containing the meals, so he figures that Will buys the food he brings, and it's not his parents who prepare him dinner. Maybe, Will is an orphan, too. The idea warms Hannibal's heart, and makes him feel slightly less lonely. In the case of the chocolate cakes, he already pulls only one cabinet to the weapon room door to block it, and eats his dinner immediately, without any more hesitation.

The next day, when he gets a paper bag of french fries, he almost starts to consume the meal without locking himself inside, but in the last second, he manages to keep his self-command and bring his dinner back to the weapon room, barricading the door again.

He especially likes the hot, crunchy bites of fried potato Will has given him this night. At the orphanage, they always cook the vegetables in boiling water, and to a level that everything loses form, loses taste, and it's hard to even recognize what he eats. An over-cooked, moist mass. The pleasant change of eating something completely different makes him unusually relaxed.

As he finishes the meal, he thinks of the kitchen of the orphanage and the rats again, and an idea starts to take shape in his head.

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Hannibal is hiding behind the kitchen door, tight beside the wall, letting the peeling, dry paint stripes of the oak door press raspingly against his torso. He holds back his breath as the old cook sleepily stumbles around in the dark kitchen, searching for the water jug and a gulp of cold water.

Hannibal has sneaked out of the dormitory around midnight, and he waits now until the old man finishes fumbling with the jug, and the sound of his loud snoring becomes audible again. The cook sleeps in the corner of the kitchen to avoid thievery because it happened a few times when overly hungry orphans broke in and ate some of his stocks.

But lately, the old cook has become negligent again, and tends to leave the back door unlocked, believing that no one is reckless enough to risk stealing while he is sleeping in the same room.

After hearing the snoring of the old man, Hannibal slowly sidles along the dust-covered wall, out from behind the door, and steps into the room. The moonlight entering through the soiled, blurred windowpanes is enough for him to see the lines of kitchen furniture, pots, baskets and pitchers.

He is very silent and careful as he takes two huge slices of white bread only served for employees from under soft linen from a flat basket, and then starts searching for the salami. There must be some kind of salami here because he can always see the personnel eat some sort of smoked meat for supper.

He follows the scents, and finds the smoked salami behind a pile of cabbages. He wants to put some of it between the bread slices, but he also spots a wooden pot filled with butter, so first, he adds a tiny bit of butter – a hopefully invisible missing amount – to the bread before filling the sandwich with smoked salami.

He is more than careful not to make any noises while he prepares Will's sandwich – his future trap.

Actually, he would have never tried to steal food for himself. The consequences might be worse than starvation, if he gets caught. It's possible that he'll just get a minor punishment like cleaning some floors or dusting some shelves, but if they deem his act serious and take him to the basement... He has to avoid risking that, by all means. Even though lately, they don't do that too often – they preferred him while he was younger, with less apparent physical signs of adolescence and less strength outlined in his muscle tones. But it still happens every once in a while, so he usually refrains from attracting attention.

He opens the lid of another wooden pot and finds a big white cheese soaking in salty water. Taking a spoon, Hannibal gives a pondering tap to the side of the soft, round cheese. It doesn't look very tasty and smells sour like vinegar, but maybe Will likes cheese and hasn't eaten one in a long while...

He has to remind himself that it doesn't matter what Will likes. The sandwich is going to be a trap, not a gift. Still, he pokes the cheese once more, and then cuts a thin slice from its side to sample it. It tastes better than he expected, and it's very probable that Will would like it too, therefore, he carefully removes two small parts and puts them into the sandwich.

He takes a clean dish cloth and wraps the sandwich into it, also placing two tomatoes and an apple in the package, though he wouldn't be able to explain why. He only needs one sandwich for his trap - any other additions are absolutely unnecessary, and they just increase the likelihood of the theft being discovered by the kitchen personnel...

He is able to force himself to stop only when his hand is already in a basketful of dried mushrooms, intending to spice Will's cheese with a hint of fungi. With regained self-control, he pulls his fingers back from the basket, letting the slices of mushroom fall back to their original places, and then turns his back on the kitchen shelves.

It's time to leave.

-

Will decides that he is ready to set his trap in motion. He observes Hannibal every night from a safe distance, and he can clearly see that the older boy is losing some of his initial attentiveness. Hannibal is sloppier and sloppier in checking his surroundings before taking his meal; last time, he even forgot to look around before reaching out for the paper bag.

Obvious signs of the fact that Hannibal subconsciously started to trust Will's good intention and friendly attitude. It's time to get closer with a weapon and venture an attack. Hannibal has partially relaxed his vigilance, and this is the most Will can expect. He can sense with his strange mental skills that the older boy is not capable of having more trust than this level of calm incaution, always still slightly on his guard though, so there is no use waiting for a better chance.

Will sees from the way the older boy holds his head and his nostrils dilate that Hannibal relies on his ability to follow smells most out of all his senses – exactly like his dog did. Therefore, Will pays extra care not to let the older boy catch his smell – he always takes a long shower with clean water and washes his hair at least four times before going to sleep. He blocks out his dad's angry grumbling about him wasting too much water and being a useless, spoiled little brat for spending at least an hour under the shower. First, Will mutters a lie about head lice, but it doesn't help silence his father's surly complaints, so after that, he simply shrugs them off.

The smell is one of the reasons Will has chosen this evening to trigger his trap. The dinner he got in the coffee shop after work is a portion of spicy chicken wings, and the chicken has such a heavy scent of roasted red pepper and turmeric that Will is dead sure that Hannibal won't be able to distinguish any other smell.

Here comes the perfect opportunity to get closer to him unnoticed.

-

Hannibal crouches down in the woodshed where the groundskeeper stores his tools. Behind the piles of lumber, the lower section of an old, spider-web-covered shelf displays different types of pest control chemicals. He chooses a bottle that has the contours of a dark rodent on its label, and removes the cap from it. The liquid has barely any smell, so it's a perfect addition to the sandwich. Hannibal opens the bread slices and shifts the bottle closer to dribble some of the poison on top of the salami...

But before he could complete the motion, he stops. He watches the food for a while, and then he sets the poison bottle aside.

He doesn't need this. The sandwich in itself should be enough to lure Will out of hiding, and then he can slit Will's throat with one of his swords. No need for venom.

He puts the bottle back to its former place.

-

Will chooses a stately hall to locate his trap. He went to sleep early, just to make sure that he arrived sooner at the palace than Hannibal, and now he prepares the room. He puts the paper bag with the chicken wings in the only corner of the hall where there are no doors situated along the closest walls. It's a precaution to ensure that Hannibal won't be able to escape if the first hit won't be enough to immobilize or kill him.

Then Will takes a heavy wooden pedestal which has held an antique bronze statuette in a library-looking room. The pedestal is certainly large and massive enough to break a skull - Will needs a considerable amount of strength to lift it above his shoulder. After acknowledging that it's a suitable weapon, he carries it to the hall. A few feet away from the paper bag, there are huge, red brocade curtains hanging, decorating an otherwise empty section. Will has selected them as the proper place to start an ambush from, so he hides behind one of the curtains.

Now all he has to do is remain completely silent and wait. But somehow this inactive waiting is the hardest part. It fills his head with worries and doubts, and he has to admit to himself that he doesn't enjoy the idea of hurting Hannibal.

He is not even sure if he wants to do this at all, but he knows that he has to. Hannibal showed him the monster he was, and for one simple reason: he wanted to make Will understand that he could not be anything else. He cannot be fixed, he cannot be befriended, he cannot be saved from loneliness, because he has the deepest of all darkness in his heart, and he is capable of doing anything horrible if necessary. Will was forced to see this before he could truly let his guard down, and now he has to take countermeasures to protect himself.

And this should motivate him to destroy Hannibal, but there is something about this earnest cruelty, this unveiled horror Hannibal showed him that wrings Will's heart and makes him wish he could do anything else besides hurting Hannibal.

But however hard he tries to figure out any other option, he can't. If he just locks Hannibal inside somewhere, the older boy will surely be able to break free in no time. Will also considered leaving the palace, but there are no proper exits. Whenever he opens a door, it leads to a new sumptuous room, and where the building ends, he can't see any gates or other suitable means of exit. He has already deliberated jumping out through one of the windows, but looking out, he couldn't see any ground or yard where he could land, just empty blackness and starry dark sky, and it doesn't really seem a good idea to jump into the endless abyss of the dream night.

And Hannibal is on the hunt for him, so if the younger boy waits a little while longer without doing anything to stop him, it would mean risking his own life. If Hannibal gets somehow behind his back, then it's all going to be over. And Will knows too well that whatever wound he suffers in this weird, dream-like palace will follow him to his real life. So it's quite probable that if he gets killed here, he'll die for real. It's strange to think about it, because he wished many times that he could die, but he never once attempted suicide. He doesn't want his dad to be left alone. It would ultimately break him, and Will can't even think about it. No matter how beautiful it would be to die, he wants to hang on, just to give his dad a reason to hang on too. He has to put up a fight.

When Will can finally hear the soft echoes of Hannibal's approaching steps, he feels a twinge of pain stab into his heart.

-

Hannibal decides that he should feel content. He has never tried to bring objects to his dream palace before, but he has managed it on his first attempt this time. All he had to do was hide the sandwich under his blanket and hold the corner of the package while falling asleep, and he found himself in his palace with the sandwich in his hand.

He definitely should feel content. But oddly, this success doesn't make him happy.

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Will hears the quiet sound of inhalations as Hannibal smells the air of the hall before he enters. While waiting for the older boy, Will pinched a tiny hole in the texture of the curtain with his fingernails, and now he peers through it, following Hannibal's slim figure as the older boy approaches the paper bag. Hannibal has the butterfly sword in his hand again, and carries something else too. A package wrapped in white cloth.

Very slowly, gradually, Will lifts the heavy pedestal above his head, taking care not to make the curtain stir. In the meantime, Hannibal reaches the paper bag and takes it, putting the white package he brought to its place.

The distance is ideal. A few feet, and then Will can land a forceful blow on the back of the older boy's head. All of Will's muscles tense, and he is just about to jump from behind the curtain, but right at the very beginning of the motion, he freezes. The white cloth covering the package accidentally opens, and he sees that what Hannibal put to the place of the paper bag is an apple, some tomatoes, and a sandwich wrapped in a dish cloth. Hannibal has brought him dinner in exchange for the chicken!

And Will is simply unable to continue. He knows that he should hit, break Hannibal's skull, injure him as severely as possible... But he feels the unnamable shot of pain through his heart again, and won't move.

Hannibal takes the paper bag of chicken wings and exits the room, leaving the sandwich behind.

Will stands still for a minute, just gaping at the sandwich, almost paralyzed by the fact that Hannibal brought him dinner.

And then he forgets about everything else, and all he can feel is how happy he is to see the neatly prepared sandwich.

-

Hannibal doesn't truly leave, but hides right behind the door he exited the hall through, and leans to the keyhole to see when Will appears. He believes that he'll have to wait a very long time – maybe the whole night – for Will to find the sandwich, but he is awfully mistaken. To his astonishment, the curtains decorating one of the walls flutter, and suddenly the heavy brocade opens, and Will is standing right there. Disheveled, brown curls casting shadows over his light blue eyes, emaciated limbs trembling from cold in the oversized underwear and t-shirt, old bruises staining his waxen white skin with pale green... Will has been there all along, a few steps away from him while he was switching the two meals!

Hannibal feels a wave of unpleasant surprise benumb his muscles.

Will keeps a heavy wooden mast on his right shoulder. Hannibal is only able to recognize the object as one of the pedestals of his Greek sculptures from his study when Will puts it down on the floor. The smaller boy quickly rubs his bony shoulder after the heavy burden, and then turns to the sandwich with mysterious glitters lighting up his blue eyes.

Will doesn't even move away from the spot, but starts to eat with big, hungry bites right there.

Hannibal understands that Will planned to ambush him, but changed his mind, and now consumes the sandwich with careless, happy munching.

This would be the perfect moment to attack, but Hannibal gives himself a few last minutes to watch Will eat the dinner.

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Will likes the taste, even though the smoked, meat-like thing is very chewy and firm. But he thinks of the possibility that maybe it was Hannibal himself who prepared the sandwich and chose the ingredients for him, and it makes the food quite delicious. And he is unspeakably hungry, anyway, after he gave his dinners to Hannibal lately, so no matter how leathery the meat is, he enjoys it more than anything.

He speedily consumes the tomatoes too, and then he finishes with the apple, emitting a sigh of satisfaction.

But when he has swallowed the very last apple seed - eating the fruit in whole, the door through which Hannibal left suddenly springs open, and the older boy appears in the doorway

with the sword lifted high in his hands. And everything happens so fast that Will can hardly grasp it.

Hannibal runs and jumps towards him, moving as unworldly fast as if he were not a normal human being but a monster – an uncategorized, murderous creature lurking in the darkness - lashing out from the shadows.

A question of a split second, and the blade of the sword would slit Will's throat open. But Hannibal waited a tiny bit longer than he should have. If he had attacked Will while Will was engrossed in eating his dinner, he would have been able to perfectly catch him off guard, but now he is just a second too late...Will's reflexes save him before the sharp metal could tear into his neck: the smaller boy ducks, and is able to avoid the deadly cut. The blade sizzles across the air an inch above his forehead - he can feel the cold speed of the moving metal ruffling his hair, it's so close.

Will doesn't wait for a second cut. With all his weight, he pushes Hannibal backwards, and they both end up on the floor with a loud thump – Hannibal on his back, and Will on his side, partially on top of the older boy. The sword falls from the force of the collision onto the stone slabs from Hannibal's hand.

Will makes a desperate attempt to grab the weapon, but Hannibal is too fast; he seizes Will's wrist and tugs it back before Will can reach the butterfly sword. The smaller boy lets out a disappointed whimper and manages to kick the older boy's left ankle with all his strength, causing an involuntary convulsion of pain to stiffen Hannibal's body. But the very next moment, Hannibal hits his fist against Will's injured upper arm, which is still sensitive even after weeks, and the younger boy cries out from pain. Hannibal hauls Will's body off of his, and now he is on top, reaching out for the sword.

Will shoots his hand out, too, to be able to grasp the weapon first, but accidentally, they just push the sword further away.

Now Hannibal tries to snap at Will's throat with a fiery bite; however, Will timely figures his intention and is able to grab hold of the older boy's blond, poorly-cut hair, keeping his head back right before his sharp teeth can tear into skin.

Hannibal growls, caught between the painfully strong grip dragging his hair back and the close opportunity to sink his teeth into Will's artery. And then Will suddenly lets go, just to hit his forehead against the older boy's jaw, knocking him off of his body with the abrupt attack.

Hannibal pulls Will with him, forcing him down on the floor, trying to bite him again. Their struggle turns into a desperate, minutes-long, blood-thirsty hand-to-hand fight.

The sword is out of reach; they can't even see it anymore, but they don't stop. They scratch, and hit, and choke, and bite... Will constantly tries to shove his knees into Hannibal's abdomen, while the older boy forces his legs with his own to remain on the ground.

After a while, they are too tired from exertion to go on, and they pause, wheezing. Hannibal's colorless, uneven mops of hair stick to his forehead with cold beads of sweat, and his dark

eyes pierce into Will's light blue ones with unshakable determination... Will sees the secrets of shadows in those maroon irises, a whole empire of thoughts, dreams, and mysteries locked up behind the pale mask of Hannibal's face. For a moment, he forgets about everything else. He watches the world that entices him to feel more, to experience more, to understand more...

He realizes that he has been maintaining eye contact with Hannibal for a fairly long time, and it surprises him that it hasn't made him feel uncomfortable. It has filled him with awe instead. They both seem to be somewhat hypnotized, but after a few grating, tired exhalations, they muster some more strength, and Will manages to turn Hannibal aside and get on top, just to soon end up back on the floor again. They continue their struggle.

But something has changed after looking into each other's eyes.

Will realizes that they are not fighting anymore, but... *playing*. He can't find any better word to describe it. Their pushes and drags gradually turn less severe in intensity, and instead of dangerous, forceful scratches, bites and kicks, their motions melt into harmless attempts to turn each other around or keep each other down against the floor.

Limbs clutched tightly together, they are a panting, chaotic pile of quick grips. Their attempts are closer to exaggerated embraces than to deadly squeezes now.

Will watched a documentary TV series about dogs while he was at home getting better after the tortures and recovering from the fever caused by his infected wounds, and there was an episode where the everyday life of three puppies was introduced. The puppies played a lot together, often imitating the desperate, raging fight of adult animals, but always without truly hurting each other. And for some reason, the reminiscence of those unexperienced, innocent animals – so unsuspecting of the violence of the life-and-death struggles they were practicing, so absorbed and careless – occurs in Will's head now as their bodies roll on the floor, his arms and legs hooked together with Hannibal's.

Silent growls of exhaustion escape their throats, and after a few last minutes of wrestling, they end up lying sidewise on the stone floor, facing each other, huffing and puffing rapidly. Every muscle is burning in Will's body from the long straining, and Hannibal seems equally tired as he is lying among Will's shivery limbs, short of breath, eyes darker than ever. Their ragged exhalations softly tickle each other's mouth.

Will wonders if he could imagine a situation any more absurd than this.

The ghost of an unwitting smile crosses Hannibal's lips. It's the first time Will has seen Hannibal smile, and it makes him smile too.

They are still entangled in each other's arms as they keep lying there, breathing heavily, watching each other mutely, with the timid, pale, vague smiles on their lips.

Blur

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

When Hannibal makes a motion to adjust his arm, which is uncomfortably trapped under Will's body, Will realizes that he has fallen into a slumber and wakes up with a start. He stirs, and removes his forehead from the warm creases of the front part of Hannibal's gray pajama shirt. From the shadow of pale mops of hair crossing his thin, almost invisible eyebrows, the older boy watches Will intently; they are still lying on the hard stone floor.

Will can barely believe that he was capable of a few minutes of exhausted sleep in the arms of the person who has just attempted to murder him. But somehow he was so tired and worn after their fight that his mind blacked out.

"I'm sorry," he mutters when he sees that he has left a small stain of saliva on the neck of Hannibal's pajama shirt. He sleepily rubs the moist corner of his mouth, and then sits up. Hannibal sits up too, still keeping his dark brown eyes on the younger boy.

Will realizes the impossibility of the whole situation, and lets out a nervous chuckle. "Sorry, this is really awkward and... and bizarre," he utters, drowsily massaging his heavy eyelids with his fingertips. "I mean, I don't even want to be here. I just can't leave your palace because... because I can't. I couldn't find a way out. This is so messed up. I'm sorry, I know you can't understand me, and I sound stupid. And now I have no idea how to solve this, I have absolutely none. All I know is that I don't want to hurt you."

Suddenly, he feels a gentle squeeze around his left palm, and ascertains jumpily that Hannibal has just taken his hand. The older boy gets up, and pulls Will with him, who follows with a hint of uncertainty.

Hannibal leads him by the hand to a room which contains a big double bed with cushions and piles of blankets. With a rueful pull of the corner of his mouth, Will recognizes the blankets he got from Hannibal earlier; there are still some old blood stains on the golden-red one.

A graceful swing of his arm, and Hannibal shows Will that the younger boy is allowed to enter the room. Will suddenly feels very tired again, and his muscles burst into a trembling fit of weariness. He almost falls onto the side of the bed as he sits down. Hannibal's hands are also slightly shaking, even though the older boy is much better at disguising his exhaustion. He swiftly points at the blankets and the cushions, making Will understand that he might use them if he wants to.

After a second of hesitation, Will grabs his golden-red blanket, and pulls it on his freezing, leaden feet.

“You can have the green one, that’s the softest,” the smaller boy mumbles with a jittery drag of his eyebrows, pulling aside, showing Hannibal one of the blankets.

Hannibal seems to understand the invitation because he takes a short step closer, but then he changes his mind, and abruptly turns his back on Will. He leaves the room with paced steps, with his chin high, eyes dark and cold like black tourmaline.

Will is too tired to process any thought. With a happy sniff, he pulls the red blanket around him completely, then leans his head on one of the pillows and lets weariness take over.

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Drawn back from a dark, dreamless sleep, Will shakily opens only one eye when a shadow is cast on him. But as he realizes what he sees with his blurred, watery eyesight, he wakes up in a split second. Hannibal is standing right next to his bed, leaning above him with a dagger held tight in both of his hands, and the next moment, the older boy swings the blade, and stabs with it downwards, in Will’s direction, using all his strength.

Will hastily turns aside, pushing the weight of his body as far from his former place as he just can. The blade digs deep into the bed sheets right at the spot where Will’s heart was. Will falls from the side of the bed, and ends up on the floor with a painful crash.

He emits a startled whimper of surprise.

Hannibal lets go of the dagger, leaving it stuck in the middle of the mattress, and then he remains still, standing beside the bed, looking at Will with an almost innocent, blank expression on his face as if he didn’t do anything hostile at all.

Will takes a few rapid breaths; his heart has started beating so violently after the unexpected, sudden attack that he can barely control his lungs. When he can finally ease the pace, he gets up from the floor with a silent moan.

“You could have found a nicer way of waking me up, you know,” he utters, shaking his head and rubbing his aching elbow that got hit during the fall.

Hannibal stares back at him without blinking, like a snake. And then, the older boy suddenly stirs, passes round the bed and walks up to Will. With a firm grip, he takes Will’s hand again, pulling him towards the door.

The touch catches Will off guard, making him feel even more shocked and confused than before. But Hannibal acts as if it was completely normal what he is doing, tugging Will with him out of the room and along the corridor.

The younger boy is still dizzy after the sleep, can barely grasp what’s going on around him, and the only thing that can get through the fog of numb astonishment is the warmth of the

hand around his. Usually, he doesn't get touched other than his dad's drunken punches, and he is sure he doesn't need it either - he doesn't like any signs of closeness from other human beings. Still, he finds that this time, it's almost nice that he can feel Hannibal's fingers clasp around his hand.

Will can remember that a few years ago, his dad made some very obscene and derogatory comments about two men they once saw hold hands while walking in a park. Theoretically, holding hands is something teenage boys shouldn't do either, but it seems like an effective method of showing each other without words which direction they are supposed to go, so Will lets Hannibal keep his fingers locked tight in his palm.

Hannibal leads him to the library looking room where Will took the wooden pedestal from.

"What are we doing here?" Will asks in a silent breath. "Are you planning to kill me here?"

No answer.

Will clears his throat, and turns to the older boy with a questioning look on his face.

As an only reply, Hannibal places an empty book in Will's hands, and chooses one for himself as well, and then sits down at the desk. For a while, Will is just standing in the doorway, nervously creasing the fringe of the carpet with his bare toes, holding the book Hannibal gave him as carefully as if it was something possibly dangerous. Then he gives a little shrug, and takes place on the other chair next to Hannibal.

With a short nod of agreement, the older boy also gives a pen to Will, and starts to write in his own book – Hannibal lists the words they learned together on their first days.

Letting a hesitating furrow linger on his forehead, Will takes his pen and follows Hannibal's example. He also writes the words down in the respective book in front of him.

And then Hannibal adds new word pairs: one half in English, the other one in his own foreign language. Will realizes with surprise that the older boy has already studied dozens of new phrases on his own.

Once, Hannibal turns to the smaller boy, and gives him a stern look, so Will pulls a bit closer, and obediently starts to copy the new words in his book too, keeping his eyes on the neat, blue loops and curves of ink: the long lines of letters Hannibal creates with the swift moving of his pen.

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Hannibal watches the younger boy from the corner of his eye only. Will is hunching over the words he diligently records in the book Hannibal allocated to him. He is a bit lagging behind with his list, so now he makes efforts to catch up with Hannibal, scribbling away quickly. A chaos of brown curls of hair shiver along his forehead, blue eyes blurred with concentration... Somehow, the strange idea occurs to the older boy that Will seems as small and soft now as if he could be squeezed to death by a simple hug. Hannibal would never in his life be able to

explain why he has just thought about something like a hug... But the idea of squeezing Will into a red, bleeding paste seems rather natural. It would be interesting to see how a completely soft body could be pressed into a boneless, raw mass like minced meat.

Hannibal scrutinizes the smaller boy with unveiled curiosity now.

Will doesn't smell like fish or oil this time. He was smart enough to wash his body clean before trying to attack the older boy. An intriguing sign of intelligence. The pig-like creatures that surround Hannibal in his everyday life don't have the ability to relate to his skills this attentively. Will is different. Much different.

Hannibal shifts closer to take in more of the smell. It's nothing like the smells of uninteresting routines, it's Will's own. The smell of naked skin hiding under the elongated pieces of poorly compiled nightwear, the smell of raw sinews, clean hair, a soft and wet mouth... And all just Will's.

Hannibal leans to Will's slender, white neck, and smells him from even closer. A jumpy stir trembles the younger boy, and the pen falls from Will's hand. Hannibal can see that he has scared Will and made the smaller boy's cheeks flush with a light tinge of redness. He hasn't seen anyone ever blush for him like this, and it surprises him and warms him with a pleasant expectant feeling he hasn't felt before. He realizes that Will has also started blinking a bit more rapidly than usual.

Will mutters something Hannibal doesn't understand a word from and pulls away. Hannibal retreats as well, crossing his arms and leaning back on his chair.

There's awkward silence lingering heavy in the room, while both boys avoid eye contact and try to look invisible, as if they were not really there. Only the silent puffs of their exhalations are audible in the stillness of the study.

Hannibal wonders if he looks neutral enough to make Will believe that seeing the slight blush had no effect on him. Will hangs his bare feet from the too-high ebony chair with edgy flutters shaking them. He starts to crease the lower corner of his oversized t-shirt, staring at the white texture.

Hannibal thinks of the sculpture that once stood in the middle of the castle yard of his family. It was a noble man - tall and cold and proud – made of white marble. When he was a small child, he liked to sit under the sculpture in their garden, dreaming that one day, he is going to be a great and famous man like the one who lives forever in the form of pure white stone. Now he tries to pretend that he is a sculpture, without a stir. Inaudible breathing, his chest barely lifting and sinking, eyes darting at an imaginary spot in the air... Focusing on making his whole body a controlled, frozen disguise, he manages to erase any baffling thought.

At last, Will turns back to Hannibal, and after hesitating a little bit more, the smaller boy finally straightens his back and haltingly moves his right hand forward... And then gently slides his palm over the blond, straight mops of the older boy's hair – with a motion as soft and careful as if he was touching a very rare and extremely dangerous animal. Two little, insecure shifts of Will's palm, clumsy, yet cautious, and he briefly strokes the top of Hannibal's head twice.

Darkness

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

As Will puts his hand on Hannibal's forehead and carefully strokes the older boy, Hannibal looks at him coldly, almost offended, and he seems to be close to sweeping Will's hand off; his palms make a stir on the outside of his crossed arms. But then he doesn't move. The frozen hostility fades in his brown irises, and he lets the smaller boy finish the brief touches. Will feels somewhat relieved that he survived his first attempt to caress Hannibal, and chooses to postpone any possible second occasion until an unknown future day, because the look in Hannibal's eyes has definitely reminded Will of the look in his dog's eyes right before she bit his hand severely.

After a few last seconds of awkward silence, Will turns back to his book, and starts to pronounce the new words for Hannibal.

The next day, Will prepares a lesson for Hannibal while he is at school. He tries to recall the same phrases he chose weeks ago for their never-happened lesson, and adds a few more complicated ones, taking into consideration that Hannibal has made real progress while studying alone. However, Hannibal's pronunciation has been awful, since he couldn't learn it on his own, so Will adds a significant time frame they can fill with pronunciation practices.

When the evening is nigh, he feels a bit apprehensive though, anxious about seeing Hannibal again after their weird last night. What if Hannibal tortures him like the last time Will prepared a lesson with positive expectations in his heart? Or what if the older boy simply starts the hunt after Will all over again? Or if he sets a trap? Or if he locks Will somewhere Will can't escape from? Or... There are so many questions, and all are mistrustful, fearful and suspicious. Will is unable to look forward to their new meeting with the same pure happiness he did before Hannibal tied him, tortured him, and ate a tiny part of him, or before Hannibal chased him and tried to slash his throat open, or almost stabbed him in the heart with a dagger... But still, Will can't wait to see the older boy again.

When he arrives at the palace, he instantly searches for the library-looking room, and finds Hannibal sitting on the floor, in one corner, leaning his back against a tremendous bookcase. He rests his book on his knees, and gives Will a lazy look, eyelids flat and heavy. He seems more relaxed than ever in the past few weeks, so Will musters his courage, and takes place next to him with a muttered, "Hello," setting the paper with the lesson he prepared between them. With a half-hearted motion, Hannibal puts his book next to the paper.

Will almost starts to loosen up too, and forget about his worries, but then suddenly, the leisured slackness disappears from Hannibal's expression, his eyes glint, and the next second,

his arms are around Will's torso, pushing him down on the floor. His weight holds Will down against the carpet. Will almost panics. He believes that Hannibal is trying to hurt him again and he is close to starting to writhe, kick, and bite in order to break free. But then he realizes just in time that the older boy's grip is much weaker than a murder attempt.

And then Will understands. He slides an arm around Hannibal's waist, hooks a leg around his knees, and with an abrupt push, twists Hannibal around, on his back. He ends up on top of the older boy, with a blunt flop. Hannibal grasps him by the elbow and pulls him aside just enough to be able to turn from beneath, and climb above Will... They are playing again.

They stop only when they have to catch their breath from exhaustion, less bruised than yesterday after the real fight, but equally tired, and they spend a while lying next to each other on the carpet, a few feet away from the desk, panting, watching each other.

It takes a fairly long time to regain their strength, but after they gather some, they sit up. Hannibal opens his book, and with a small smile, Will searches for the paper he prepared and his own book.

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As a week passes, they develop a routine. They prepare a lesson for each other during daytime, plus practice what they have already learned. At night, they start with an hour-long play, gently wrestling and grappling until they get too tired to go on. Will is able to see from the look in Hannibal's eyes when the older boy starts to find their play-fight too burdensome, and Hannibal reads Will's bodily signs well, too. They always stop before it would be too much, even without any kind of direct communication. They have a rest on the soft carpet, mutely and sleepily watching each other, and then they learn the new lessons together.

Every once in a while, Will also brings dinner for Hannibal, though he only does that occasionally, since he needs the food as well, but he likes to see the satisfied glimmer in Hannibal's dark eyes, so whenever he feels strong enough to pull through a whole day without having a proper meal, he gives his dinner to the older boy. Once, even Hannibal brings a sandwich for Will. However, the salami Hannibal has placed between the somewhat dry bread slices is extremely firm, accompanied by only few shreds of sauerkraut and one small fragment of cheese, and the food tastes poorly; Will almost chokes on it. He tries to hide his discomfort though and consume the sandwich with a grateful nod, but he has to realize that his disgust is visible when Hannibal takes a piece of roasted fish from his paper bag and places it on top of the last few bites of sandwich. Will blushes with shame, quickly gives the fish back and tries to finish his meal as soon as possible.

The fact that Will didn't enjoy the food makes Hannibal unusually tense, and that night, the aura in the room is embarrassing and ice cold. Fortunately, they manage to put this behind them when they meet again the next day.

In general, there is very little communication between them. Hannibal utters words and phrases only while they are learning, but doesn't use the language to express any thoughts. He doesn't try to communicate at all, and Will doesn't force it. Sometimes, the smaller boy mumbles observations or questions in English – especially when he feels awkward – but

without really expecting an answer, and he doesn't try to put the studied new foreign words to use either.

The only way they communicate is Will's empathy to understand how Hannibal might feel, and Hannibal's keen attentiveness to recognize even the smallest signals Will's body gives. But they both choose not to push this any further. They feel safe and contented like this.

And this silent, mutual agreement is what makes their relationship so unique and precious for Will that he is close to believing that they are becoming real friends.

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Three weeks have passed, and Will has gotten accustomed to their habits. This night, he is rushing expectantly to the library-looking room, keeping some fresh texts in his left hand, and a paper bag of doughnuts in the other one. He is looking forward to this evening even more than usual, because they are going to learn one of the past tenses, and teaching Hannibal grammar is always a bigger challenge than practicing simple words. Will enjoys seeing how smart Hannibal is, and whenever they reach some more difficult tasks while studying, he can experience the delectation of watching the older boy improving gracefully and easily.

Will is a bit slower and clumsier, but he doesn't truly mind the disapproving glances Hannibal shoots at him whenever he makes a mistake. He just gives a brief, embarrassed half-smile and tries again. And Hannibal seems to like his resolution, because he never once tries to stop Will while the smaller boy is struggling with some more complicated foreign sentences for the umpteenth time. The look on the older boy's pale, haughty face turns soft, almost affectionate, whenever Will gives signs of his determination.

Will arrives at the study, and opens the door, but he doesn't see Hannibal this time. At first, he thinks that Hannibal is planning an ambush for their playing, so he walks around, waiting for the older boy to jump out from behind one of the shelves, but Hannibal doesn't appear. He is not in the room.

Will presumes that this must mean that Hannibal is still not asleep, and that's why he is not present, so at first, the younger boy is not worried. He sits down, and waits patiently.

When almost an hour goes by, and there's no sign of Hannibal, Will starts to become anxious. It has never happened before that Hannibal arrived this late. He always seemed to try to be here with Will as soon as possible.

After a second hour passes without the older boy arriving, Will decides that he'll set out to find Hannibal. It makes him feel a bit nervous though. If Hannibal is already here in the palace but hasn't come to the study, it can only mean one thing: the older boy doesn't want to see Will. And of course, in this case, it might not be the best idea to go searching for him. But Will is unable to deliberate the question rationally. He wants to see if Hannibal is alright, and this wish is stronger than any other concern.

He wanders from room to room, checking passages, corridors, stairs, and balconies, but he can't find Hannibal. After a while, he grows tired and starts to give up hope. He almost thinks that his trip is pointless, but finally, he arrives at a half-open door that leads to a huge bathroom he has never visited before. He can hear a swash, and other fresh noises of moving water, so he opens the door wider with increased curiosity.

The walls and the floor of the room are covered with emerald-green tiles, while the taps and the pipes have the color of gold. There are three rectangular pools in the foreground, and behind those, four stair treads lead to a hot tub sunk into the floor in the back of the room. And Will spots Hannibal there, lying in the hot tub on his back, his figure covered with the massive amount of foam trickling around on the water surface. Colorless hair sticking to his neck, his nape supported on the cold tiles, water running from golden taps...

The water is glimmering with colorful play of bubbles from the bathing oil and the mixing of the soft, white foams with rings of splashes. Hannibal leans his head backwards, watching the ceiling, muscles as motionless, eyes as black, and his stare as dead as if his neck was broken. There is something eerie in the darkness in those eyes. Will has never seen the look in Hannibal's eyes this cold and empty - and it was already cold and empty enough to scare him before.

Will clumsily knocks on the open door, just to make sure that Hannibal knows that he is there. The older boy doesn't even blink.

Will wonders what the socially acceptable way is to react to the situation. His dad always tells him that if he doesn't have any better idea, he should try to guess what normal people would say or do, and act accordingly. Probably, normal people would walk away. But Will's mind seems to sink into a fog of clueless, worried confusion, and he is unable to think about *other people*.

"Is it okay if I come in?" he asks quietly.

No answer. Hannibal doesn't stir; the look on his face is blank like a corpse's.

With slow, uncertain steps, Will walks to the side of the hot tub and sits down on the wet, foam-splashed tiles not far from Hannibal, a stair step away from him. The younger boy can feel the streaks of splashed water unpleasantly cool his thin nightwear, damping his skin.

"Are you feeling unwell?" Will continues talking, but the older boy doesn't react; he doesn't even give any sign of agreement or disagreement to the fact that Will has entered the room. He remains completely still.

"Do you want me to go away?" Will's next question gets no response either, so the younger boy pulls a bit closer, and has a look at the body parts of Hannibal that are above the foamy water. Pale skin glittering from silvery water drops... Muscles bound like rope... Slender, yet distinct neck and shoulders... The older boy rests his arms on the tiles, outside the water, elbows bracing limp against the emerald-green tiles of the stairs. Will can see that Hannibal's wrists, which were badly bruised the first day they met, are freshly wounded again. Ugly, deep tears on his skin, brutally violent ligature marks as deep as cuts, surrounded by fresh blood drops. Hannibal must have been chained with metal.

It makes Will's heart miss a beat as he wonders what could have happened that made the boy – who always looks calm, cold and calculated like a murderous reptile – drag on his chains with so much pointless, desperate force that it caused him these ghastly wounds. Will can't even imagine anything like that. Or maybe he could if he let his peculiar mind sink into the idea, but he doesn't want to make any blind guesses.

He inches a tiny bit closer, with a worried frown.

“Can I have a look at your hands? You've been hurt.”

When hearing the word ‘hand’ which they have already learned together, Hannibal abruptly removes his arms from the edge of the hot tub, and sinks his wrists under the oily blur of warm water, hiding the bruises from the younger boy. That's the only motion he makes.

“I'm sorry,” Will breathes meekly, “I didn't mean to...” His voice fades away.

He looks around and finds a jar filled with some kind of cream for soft skin. Taking the white porcelain jar, Will carries it to Hannibal, placing it next to him on one of the tiles. “Maybe... maybe we could put something like this on your cuts...”

Silence.

And then, all of a sudden, Hannibal shoots his arms out, and grabs Will by the shoulder... The next moment, the younger boy feels the floor disappear, and waves of hot water collide around his body. His vision turns into stinging blackness, and strong arms keep him down under the sizzling, swirling foams, hands locking tight around his neck. Will wants to scream, but his mouth fills with water... He wants to breathe, but his windpipe fills with water... He wants to get back to the light, but everything fills with water... And as he struggles against the strong hands holding him down, all he can feel is water everywhere, around him, inside him, above him...

Will has never once before felt this sure that Hannibal is trying to kill him for real.

He thrashes, hits into empty water, but the older boy keeps him under the waves, firm and immovable. Will coughs, but the more he coughs, the more water is drawn into his windpipe.

At first, the pressure around his throat is the worst, but then the burning, acute pain – rushing through his nostrils, tensing his ribcage, almost bursting his chest – takes away the importance of every other suffering.

It's black and white, and then he sees colors, and then light and dark again... Burning like acid... Green rings of light springing from nothing in front of his eyes... Burning like fire...

Breathe... breathe... breathe...

But the only thing Will can feel is water.

Please, some air... Please, please...

Arms shooting into dark space, searching for a spot to grab, to scratch, to tear into little fragments of breathlessness...

And then Will manages to kick Hannibal in the abdomen so forcefully that the older boy doubles up with pain, and lets go of his victim's neck. Will hastily pushes himself up above the water, and with agonized rattling, he gets his head out into the open, drawing air eagerly into his lungs.

Coughing, bubbling, he collapses on the edge of the tub, fighting for every inhalation with desperate intensity. He rejects splashes of colorful, oily water onto the shiny tiles from his mouth. And then he climbs out of the hot tub, and runs out of the room as fast as he can.

Hannibal doesn't follow.

Will is unable to think, he just staggers along empty corridors; golden figures and gems and antique furniture swirling around his dimming field of vision... Finally he stops at a door, and falls against the hard, wooden slab, still emitting choking, forceful coughs, spurting water on everything around him with each heave of his lungs.

He has found the bedroom with the double bed and his blanket.

The idea of his blanket is enough to light up one clear thought in Will's head: the wish to find shelter from the growing coldness caused by the water dripping from him. Therefore, he enters the room.

He doesn't lay himself down in his water-soaking clothes but grasps his red blanket from the piles of blankets resting in the middle of the bed. Twisting the soft texture around his body completely, he crouches down in the stone-paved corner, wheezing, quivering, and leaning his forehead on his knees. He closes his eyes that are bleary and blurred from the bathing oil, and lets out a silent mewl of lonely fear.

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Will is not sure how much time has passed since he hid in the corner of the bedroom. It might be hours.

His mind keeps orbiting around the same painful, sad thoughts, and he is unable to stop. He is scared, shaken, and... deeply disappointed.

Being close to Hannibal is much more hurtful than the friendship he once developed with his dog. This is worse than taming a dog. More like futile attempts to tame a monster. A monster that is so uncontrollable, so wild and violent, that no sane person would ever think that it's a feasible idea to get closer to him.

Will doesn't think that Hannibal is like this because of the abuse he suffers outside his palace. It might make him more hostile and less trustful, but the raw violence, the ice cold cruelty, or the complete lack of empathy about the pain he causes roots deeper in him. It's in his nature.

And now this thought hits Will with all its severity. Hannibal is a monster. A real one, not like the one his poor dog used to be called by the neighborhood kids. No. Hannibal is a real *monster*.

Will hasn't ever believed that Hannibal can be 'cured' with time and kindness and patience. After growing up with a dad who swore to change every three weeks or so, talked about putting the bottle down and doing something with his life, only to fall back into the same routines in less than three days, Will has learned soon enough not to believe that people can be fixed. He has had absolutely no illusions about Hannibal. He didn't expect Hannibal to change, but he expected their relationship to change. He genuinely liked the mysterious foreign boy, and his days felt more meaningful with him, and he hoped he could bring the same feeling to life in Hannibal. He didn't want to give up on this pleasant bond. But now he feels so lonely, so hurt, and he finds his attempts to get over Hannibal's defenses so pointless...

Are they still at the same place where they were two months, three weeks, or a day ago? No real improvement, only superficial illusions of friendliness? Hannibal still wants to kill him, he still wants to be alone in his palace, he still thinks that being without Will would be better than sharing his weaknesses with him...

When Will started to tame his dog, she bit him the first time he tried to stroke her, but never after that. She kept growling and pulling away for a few days, but did not snap at Will's hand again. She let Will take small steps towards her and gave him a chance to prove her that he actually wanted to be there for her. But Hannibal doesn't do the same. He might behave friendly on the outside, but inwardly, always keeps his distances away. Maybe, he really has no positive feelings for Will. Maybe, it doesn't matter to him if Will is by his side... Maybe, Will just annoys him with his presence... Will could make himself useful with teaching, and that kept Hannibal from killing him for a while, but that's all.

The door quietly opens, and Will is dragged back from his despondent thoughts with a start.

Hannibal appears on the doorstep. He is already wearing his gray pajamas, and his skin is more-or-less dry, though his hair is still leaking some silvery streaks of water down on his slim neck; locks looking shades darker like this – wet and sticking together.

Will carefully pulls a bit backwards, as if he was wishing he could disappear in the very corner of the room, among the creases of red blanket and golden tassels.

The older boy takes a slow step inside the room, and then comes to a halt.

While waiting with a listless groan for something to happen, Will directs his eyes towards the corner of the carpet on the floor. He doesn't look up at Hannibal again, because it seems easier to handle his disappointed pain if he keeps staring at an inanimate object. He decides that he won't do anything to stop Hannibal, no matter what the older boy is intending to do to him. It's time to get over with this.

Hannibal approaches him so silently, that Will only realizes that the other boy reached him when a shadow falls on his face, and bare feet appear on the edge of the carpet. Will makes a

shivery motion to pull the blanket higher on his shoulders while Hannibal kneels down beside him.

And then the older boy puts his palms to Will's chin, cupping his face with white, slim hands, a bit cold and moist from water. He leans closer, and – drawing a surprised little gasp from Will – touches his own forehead to the smaller boy's. Eyes closed, he keeps Will's face to his, foreheads pressed together, soft sighs mingling.

Will shuts his eyes too, letting the new feeling burn away all the bitter pain that has whirled in his mind. What he realizes breaks him inside, and the pain that comes afterwards is numb, with empty reminiscences of his former stormy sorrow - dark and thick like venous bleeding.

He understands that this is Hannibal's way of saying that deep in his heart, he is glad he didn't manage to drown Will.

As a timid acceptance of the strange apology, Will rubs his nose to Hannibal's, and then puts his arms around the older boy's shoulders, carefully embracing him. Hannibal lets go of Will's jaw with one hand, and hugs him back with his right arm. His left palm is still keeping Will's face to his.

"I'm sorry for... for seeing you vulnerable," Will whispers. "I know you don't like to show weakness, to reveal imperfections. It makes you feel uncomfortable. You want people to see you strong and invincible and dignified... Better than anyone else. Beautiful. Flawless. Superior. That's how you see yourself, that's who you want to be, and you want everyone else to see it too. But please don't put on these masks when you are with me. I'm not like them." Will's voice turns husky as his empathy skill shakes him to the core of his being, and makes him lose his breath. He continues haltingly, "And... and wounds don't make you less perfect to me. You are interesting, and... different. I want to know you for who you really are. I really want to know you. I'm forced to see so many things I don't want to see, but I want to see you. Only you. I want to stay with you."

Will is not sure where his tremulous words are coming from, because he has never talked about a genuine feeling like this before. But he is overwhelmed with unknown emotions, and all he can do is breathing his soft sentences against Hannibal's mouth, forehead pressed to Hannibal's, noses touching.

Hannibal doesn't reply, and most probably, he couldn't even understand more than one or two words from what Will said, but he must have understood the meaning nevertheless, because he pulls the smaller boy even closer, and gives him a vague, almost unnoticeable caress across the back. The fact that Hannibal has stroked him sends a shiver of never-felt excitement down Will's spine, and he instinctively mirrors the motion with his hands, running his palms up and down on Hannibal's muscular back.

They keep their eyes closed as they are sitting there, foreheads softly resting against each other.

For a while, Will is a bit nervous because of the unusual closeness, surrounded by the darkness behind his closed eyelids, but then he gets comfortable, and enjoys Hannibal's arm

around him and the fingers holding his jaw... It's so intimate. It's something he has never dreamed to ever experience. It's warm and heavy. He starts to find it nice.

Up until he hears a low, silent growl, and feels a sharp bite against his left cheek.

The Touch

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Hannibal presses his teeth deeper into Will's soft skin, until he can feel the salt of blood burning his lips. He hears a brief, high-pitched sound as Will lets out a silent cry of pain against the older boy's neck, tensing his fingers into Hannibal's shoulder blades with sudden force. After a while, Hannibal stops and lets go of the skin, giving a last little lick with the tip of his tongue to the small wound he has left on Will's face.

It makes Hannibal wonder why exactly he bit Will. It was not a sign of anger, nor an attack; it was more like an expression of a sudden wish. Will was so soft and delectable while hugging him that Hannibal felt an instinctive urge to taste him. Will doesn't look like feeling complimented by the gesture though; he pulls away, rubs the red bite mark on his left cheek with his palm, and casts his eyes down ruefully on the floor. Hannibal can see that the smaller boy is feeling intimidated.

Will suddenly stirs, and hastily pulls the damp blanket tighter around him. At first, Hannibal doesn't know what could have startled the younger boy in this exact moment, but then he realizes that he has started emitting a quiet, throaty growl again, and that's what scared Will. He represses the sound, then leans closer to the smaller boy, and smells his water-dripping hair in silence. He hopes that this harmless motion is going to be enough to slightly calm Will, and then he gives another bite to Will's wounded cheek, trying to draw blood again. Will lets out a brief hiss of pain, but he is not pulling away any more. And when Hannibal lets go of his skin for a short while, Will shifts closer to Hannibal's upper body, and suddenly bites back, worrying the skin of the older boy's neck an inch on the left from the Adam's apple. The unexpected reciprocation of his bite surprises Hannibal, and at first, he feels ready to protect himself, pushing Will away, but then he soon starts to like what Will is doing, and his curiosity is strong enough to make him choose to let Will finish. The younger boy is not hurting him too much, more like teasing him.

After a brief while of pondering, Hannibal continues biting Will too, but without wounding him again. Soft, superficial bites, gentle snaps at random spots on Will's face... Hannibal can hear that muffled, silent growls start to leave Will's throat too, as the small bites turn faster and more frequent.

Their mouths wander up and down, teeth scratching, interspersed with hoarse, deep sounds of exhalations, warm tongues tracing each other's features with the wet pain of bites... And in a heated moment, their lips accidentally meet. It's just a split-second, the ghost of a touch, almost impalpable, but they both freeze.

And then they move a few inches away.

Hannibal turns as motionless as a sculpture, and Will starts bumbling hurried apologies – as far as the older boy can guess from the awkward jumble of words Will utters. And then Will turns even further away, blinking, nervously crossing his arms as if hugging himself. But his hands are unable to rest for a long while, and they start fidgeting soon. Hannibal's reticence must make the younger boy even more uneasy, because Will starts repeatedly wiping his mouth as if wishing for erasing the memory of the touch of Hannibal's lips.

Hannibal is mesmerized by what happened, being unsure what to think about it. There are so many different inner experiences they have just gone through in a couple of hours. The bathroom, the drowning, the hug, the bites, and now this...

He is unable to tell any more if he wants to hurt Will, or protect him, or play with him, or kill him, or all of these, or none of these... But one thing is for sure: he is hypnotized by this strange boy. Will is so different from anything he has ever seen before. Uncut. Untainted. Beautiful.

Hannibal has to admit to himself that he truly likes Will. Not just in a sense when someone enjoys good food or the warmth of a fireplace in winter, but more like his sister. This time, it's somewhat different though. The feeling brings more thrills and contradictions; his love is not the simple and pure attachment he experienced with the small girl. This bond now is raw and even more deep-rooted and exciting, and its complexity is what mesmerizes Hannibal the most.

He failed to make Will his true enemy when tortured him and partly skinned him. However, in some other sense, he managed to make Will his enemy. Yes, he made Will his enemy, but still kept the potential of making Will his friend, and the weirdest of all things is that these two situations are not two different ways where their relationship might be developing, but they are present together at the same time. And – also oddly enough – the fact that Will was once ready to kill him, to bludgeon Hannibal to death with a heavy wooden pedestal, has made him even more interesting for Hannibal. It has shown Hannibal that the innocent sadness in those light blue eyes hides a deep, bitter inner strength, which results in a wonderful mixture of soft human emotions and unscrupulous guile. Will is a danger and a possibility, and a wonderful secret to explore, and even a glimpse at Will deepens Hannibal's obsession-like wish to get closer to him instead of backing out.

Will makes Hannibal realize how lonely he is. No matter how hard he tells himself that he is better off alone, that he doesn't get and doesn't need anyone's help – and his inner strength is basically supported by the fact that he is able to manage everything on his own – Will still makes him want to give up his loneliness and take a step closer. Because Will is nothing like the people he has met before, and he can sense that Will is truly unique. Maybe, Will is the cure to the cold loneliness he has been forced to live in from the day his world collapsed.

But maybe, Will is trouble. A dangerous temptation to deform him, to wound his inward integrity, to weaken his stability, to take away his treasured palace... So many doubts; swirling, restless.

Will is still stuttering apologies, unsuspecting of the war of conflicted thoughts raging in Hannibal's head. Cheeks red from shame, brown curls trembling from inner agitation, Will is hiding his bleeding bite marks with his palm now, covering his face.

Hannibal needs answers to the questions that torment him from the days he first met Will. And he wants to know if the kiss was real or just an accident. Can it be called a kiss at all? Or was it just an unfortunate brush of lips?

He would have never believed that he was going to have his first kiss like this. Though – unlike so many other orphans he overheard speaking yearningly about their first romantic experiences – he haven't fantasized about it at all. He didn't have any plan as to how to kiss someone. Basically, he considered it as an uninteresting, practical step needed to be taken if he ever found it necessary to charm a girl. However, now that it happened with Will, he feels unknown excitement and a surprising amount of curiosity about it. But, well, maybe it wasn't a kiss. Maybe it was just an accident.

Hannibal throws a scrutinizing glimpse at the smaller boy. Will is still flushed red, keeping his eyes on the floor, looking upset and inconvenienced. Will doesn't really look like someone who enjoyed their so-called kiss. Hannibal feels a delicious, soft tingling brush past his lips as he recalls the memory, but Will's ashamed mumble and burning face don't let him feel assured that Will has experienced something similar. Probably not.

The idea makes Hannibal tense, and he decides that he won't categorize what happened as his first kiss. No. It was just a stupid mistake. A brief failure of coordination in their motions. That's all.

One day he is going to kiss a girl as a step of enchanting and influencing her, and then, that will be his first kiss. It sounds more appropriate.

For a last time, he looks at Will again, searching for any positive signs. But when he sees the younger boy edgily, fervently rub his mouth again, Hannibal turns away, and stays stationary for the rest of the night.

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Will needs the whole school day to get up enough nerve to talk about the kiss with his dad. He runs all possible scenarios in his head, and deliberates a lot of ways how he could bring the topic up. Maybe, he should stick to his story about his foreign crush. And, of course, omit the fact that Hannibal is a boy, and not a girl. He should just ask if his dad thinks his son had his first kiss, or the whole thing was an accident that couldn't be considered a kiss. Will blushes even at the idea of really kissing Hannibal, and his heart starts beating loud.

But, somehow, he doesn't like the version that starts with an obvious lie about Hannibal. He doesn't feel like saying again that Hannibal is a girl. He is very proud of being close to a smart, mysterious, and interesting person like Hannibal, and he doesn't want to lie about him as if he were ashamed of him in any sense.

But he is afraid that his dad would get mad and beat him up if he even hinted at the fact that he might have been in a kiss-like situation with another boy. Finally, he decides that he'll start with a general question, and he'll see how it goes.

As Will arrives home from the coffee shop in the evening, he finds his dad on the couch, watching baseball, drinking beer, half-sitting-half-lying-down, legs thrown across the coffee table.

"What happened to your face?"

Will almost jumps when his father's barked question shoots through the alcohol-smelling air of the room.

"Er, I was... I was just..." Will starts stuttering.

"What? Speak up, you little punk." His dad sits up and darts a sharp glance at the wounds on Will's left cheek, narrowing his eyes. "It looks like a bite to me. You were petting some wretched cur again, weren't you?"

"No, no, it was a... a ferret. One of my classmates brought his ferret to school and it nipped me from its cage."

"I hope you wrung the neck of the fucking animal. I won't steal medicine for you again if your wounds get infected."

Will averts his gaze, muttering, "N-no... it's... it's nothing serious."

His dad doesn't give any clear answer to this, just grumbles something in front of him from which only the words 'useless retard' are distinguishable, but they are enough to make Will bitterly pull the corners of his mouth.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" his dad asks suddenly. Will realizes that he is standing in the middle of the room, hands clasped in front of him, looking embarrassed and uncertain – exactly like someone who wants to talk about some uncomfortable issues.

"Yes... I... I guess so..." Will feels the heat of a blush spreading on his cheeks.

"What?"

Will tries to calm the pace of his breathing as the words leave his lips, "Dad, is it a very bad thing if two men kiss each other? Like... on the lips."

"Yes, it is."

Will nervously runs his palm along the wounds on his left cheek. "Why?"

"Well, it's not literally bad. It's not evil or something. But it's repulsive and unhealthy."

"Unhealthy?"

“It’s a perverted thing. I mean, would you ever even think of something like that? I wouldn’t. Real men wouldn’t consider doing anything of the like.”

Will doesn’t reply, just rubs his deepest bite mark again.

His father adds with a huge, bored yawn, “By the way, this is a stupid question. If you want to experiment, ask your Spanish bitch to try anal sex with you. You don’t need to do disgusting things with boys to have certain pleasures.”

“She is not from Spain.”

“Where is she from, then? What did you say? I forgot...”

“I haven’t even talked about it to you. You didn’t care to ask.” That’s all Will answers, and then he turns and walks towards his storage room.

“Hey, I’m sorry, okay?” His dad gets up from the couch with a groan, grasping the headrest in order to balance himself. “I was... kind of busy lately. We didn’t have time to talk. Do you want to tell me about her? Are you two still seeing each other?”

Will murmurs his answer without turning back, “Yes.”

“Where is she from?”

“I don’t know.”

“See? You don’t care about it either.”

For a moment, Will’s hand pauses on the door handle of his storage room. “I do.”

“Why don’t you ask her then?”

“She wouldn’t answer.”

His dad snorts loud. “Why do you hang out with that fucking weirdo? I told you to bang the neighbor’s daughters instead; they are, at least, able to speak. Why can’t you listen to my advice, just once in your life?” The man almost overbalances while speaking, and has to grab the couch again. “Or maybe, you are right. Women who don’t speak might be the best. Is that what you’re into?”

Will shrugs and goes into his room, pushing the door closed behind him. He has had enough of the conversation. He decides that he won’t proceed with the topic of the accident-kiss.

His dad’s replies can’t help him at all. What he feels when he is with Hannibal seems neither disgusting nor unhealthy to him. And he doesn’t think it makes him a pervert that he likes Hannibal more than anybody else he has ever met, and that his affection is so deep that he might have accidentally kissed the older boy while giving each other play-bites. If he wants to be honest with himself, the wish to hug Hannibal and feel his mouth on his skin burns strong in his veins, and it seems the most natural, purest sensation Will has ever felt.

Actually, the conversation he has just had with his dad has made him realize that he truly wants to kiss Hannibal, even though he doesn't have an inkling of how he could progress with that.

Closer

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

Will is lying under his thin blanket on top of the storage boxes, covered by the heavy smell of dust and mold, almost unable to fall asleep – he is so excited because of the kiss. He is not even sure how to do it correctly. Even though he perfectly knows what a kiss technically means, he has some doubts about the feeling and the method. Should he simply lean closer, and press his mouth on Hannibal's? Or should he start scrutinizing Hannibal's lips first, tacitly suggesting the idea? Or is it better, if he gives a small, friendly peck on Hannibal's cheek, and 'forgets' his mouth there, letting Hannibal be the one to decide whether to turn it into a real kiss or not? But this is a constrained and dishonest way to start, isn't it? And... what comes afterwards? What should he do after they finish kissing?

Will didn't think about kissing someone before the happenings of last night. Once, when he was a small kid at kindergarten, a little girl came up to him and asked him to kiss her, but he simply refused to do it – and this is the closest he has ever gotten to dealing with the topic of kissing someone.

This afternoon, at school, Will tried to examine an older boy and his girlfriend, who were sharing a passionate kiss on a bench. But he had to stop watching soon, since the girl spotted him, and he didn't want to look like a creep stalking couples at the school yard. He was not even sure which posture he should learn – the girl's or the boy's. How does that work in the case of two boys? Is it disrespect for Hannibal if he puts his palms on the back of the older boy's neck, pulling him hungrily in the direction of his mouth the way this boy did to his girlfriend? Or should he rather just keep his arms to his side, somewhere where they can't obstruct the kiss, and shift his head forward, and that's all?

And what if Hannibal doesn't want to be kissed by Will? This question is the most urgent and most important one – and it dwarfs all the other problems. How can Will know whether Hannibal is alright with the idea of the kiss or not? Will would never in his life attempt it if he suspected that it was something Hannibal didn't want. But how can one know this... without any kind of direct communication?

When Will is finally able to fall asleep, he has come to the decision that he'll wait until they finish playing. When they will be both pleasantly tired and sleepy, lying on the soft carpet, he might try to inch a little bit closer to Hannibal than usual, and get his mouth to suggestive closeness. If Hannibal pulls away, Will is going to pretend that it was just a clumsy attempt to change his position. But if Hannibal moves closer...

Will's heart starts to race even at the thought.

He likes the plan, because it gives Hannibal full control over the happenings. If the older boy is averse to the idea of the kiss, he'll have a chance to express it before Will would push them into the most awkward situation in the universe. They can near each other inch by inch, and they'll have plenty of time to turn away if that's what they choose to do.

Believing that he has found the solution to his most distressing worry, Will feels a bit relieved as the whiteness of marble walls appears around him and he enters Hannibal's palace. His anxious doubts start to get replaced by the thrills of pleasant excitement.

It makes him wonder whether Hannibal is waiting for him in the library-looking room or somewhere else, since yesterday they didn't visit that room. But yesterday was out of the ordinary, and when he arrives at the study, he sees with even more relief that the older boy is not willing to break the pattern again. Right when Will enters, he can feel strong arms locking around his upper body, and the manly smell of Hannibal's skin surrounds Will in an instant. Hannibal was hiding behind the door, and now drags Will down on the floor. Soon, the plushy, burgundy creases of the carpet surround Will with their familiar friction and warmth.

Will smiles, and encircles the older boy's trunk with both arms. They start playing.

Will is heady and absent-minded because of the idea of the kiss, but still, after a while, he cannot help but notice that Hannibal is somehow less lively this night. The older boy's motions are lacking the usual force; they are a bit slow and enervated, even though Hannibal overtly tries to conceal this.

If someone saw them on a night when they play – without understanding a single thing about their relationship – they would probably think that Hannibal and Will are fighting for dominance. That the aim of the game is to *win*. But this bystander couldn't be more mistaken. Some nights, Hannibal ends up on top, some nights Will in the exact moment they finish, and they don't mind. This is neither about petty victories over each other, nor about boosting their ego with the superficial enjoyment of being stronger than somebody else – this is about the thrill of the fight. Will feels the same pride and happiness when Hannibal makes a skillful, surprising motion to shove the younger boy down on the floor as when he himself manages to press the older boy down with an extraordinary-well planned attempt. And he knows that Hannibal feels the same way. This is not about achieving an 'I won'-situation for any of them; this is about the two of them. They can admire each other's strength, and build a deeper connection.

And now that Hannibal seems a bit weaker than usual, Will doesn't see it as a chance to get on top more often. Instead, he secretly tries to reduce the strength of his own motions to match Hannibal's less vigorous ones.

But then, when once Hannibal ends up on his back, the older boy's whole body tenses, and a painful wince crosses his face. Will – who has just pressed him down, one hand on Hannibal's left shoulder, the other one on his right hipbone – freezes, and stops pushing him. Hannibal quickly composes his wan, cold features, but the tiny second of carelessness was enough to disclose that he was in great pain. Probably, already from the start; he just tried not to let it show.

Will emits a startled little sniff, quickly hauls Hannibal back from the position that made the older boy flinch, and then completely lets go of him.

“I’m... I’m sorry,” Will stutters, trying not to stare at the back of Hannibal’s thighs, where a few little red spots start to become visible on the gray texture of his pajamas – little blood drops showing through. Some hidden wounds must have burst from the force of their wrestling. Will can’t stop uttering in breathless shock, “I’m so sorry.”

Hannibal swiftly sits up, perfectly hiding his pain now, face slack and expressionless. He grabs Will by the shoulder and tries to pull him back on the floor to play further, but the younger boy braces his palms against the ground. “N-no, don’t...”

Hannibal makes a second attempt to tug Will down, but the smaller boy is determined not to let him accomplish it, keeping his body away from the older boy with his arms supported by the floor slabs. “Please,” he moans, and Hannibal finally balks.

“I... I have a big bruise...” Will pulls his t-shirt away a bit, and shows Hannibal an older mark left after one of his dad’s drunken punches on his ribcage. “Green,” he says the word he is sure the older boy can understand very well. “You see? It’s very... hurtful. I need some rest, I’m sorry. Can we skip the playing today? And... and maybe tomorrow, until it gets a bit better? Please?”

Hannibal releases him from his strong clutch, and sits down beside Will, leaning his back against the bookcase behind him. Will suspects that the older boy has seen right through his excuse, but Hannibal doesn’t show it, neither does he give any sign of being in pain again. This makes the smaller boy’s heart ache with unnamable worries he can’t express. He just moves closer, and with mustering some courage, puts his head on Hannibal’s shoulder.

“I... I think we could talk about something in the meantime,” he suggests meekly, feeling a soft blush appearing on his cheeks. “Any topic you want. Would you like to try that with me?” Suppressing an awkward shiver, Will pulls his knees to his chest, hugging them, while still keeping his head on Hannibal’s shoulder. “We have already learned a lot of things. I’ll start with some basics, okay? My favorite color is blue. Which one is your favorite color?”

Hannibal doesn’t reply.

“I live in the United States. What’s the name of your country?”

No answer.

“Do you like music?”

Still no response. Hannibal’s mouth doesn’t even stir, even though Will knows that the older boy understood the questions.

“Okay, I guess this is not working.” Will gives an embarrassed smile, while keeping his eyes on the long rows of old books lining up along the opposite wall. “I’m going to tell you a story, then. Is there anything in particular you would like to hear about?”

Hannibal doesn't speak; he mutely turns his head in the younger boy's direction, nose almost touching Will's forehead.

"Perhaps... perhaps I could tell you about a movie I watched not a very long while ago. It was about a family and a dog. Mostly about the dog. I liked it." Will stops briefly, and then gives a sad little shrug. "Well, maybe this is not something you would want to learn more about. I don't think you like kid movies. I couldn't even finish the second half of it because my dad brought a woman home, so I went back to my room and couldn't watch TV any longer. She was a prostitute. I hope you don't understand this word, I'm just telling this to you because that's what happened. My dad fucked the prostitute, and then threw her out. He called her nasty names. It... it wasn't nice. I don't like that he treats women like this."

Will adjusts his head into a more comfortable angle on Hannibal's shoulder, while he continues speaking, "He hates women, and this is his way of showing it. It's because of my mother, I guess. She left us eight weeks after I was born. My dad used to tell me that she died of postnatal complications, but she didn't. Once, when he was very drunk, he told me that she had run away. She had big dreams, you know. She wanted to be an actress with career and shows and things like that, and couldn't bear the idea of burying herself in a small town, working all day and taking care of a baby. So she simply disappeared one day. She died of heroin overdose two years later, alone in an empty alley, without getting a single role. My dad heard about her death at the pub, being the only time he heard about her again. She was the love of his life." Will pauses, making a small grimace. "My dad hasn't forgiven her. He wanted to marry her, and stuff like that. He has never gotten over it; I think that's why he started drinking. As for me, I don't have any feelings for her. None. My dad was the one who was there for me, no matter what – she is nobody to me. To be honest, I'm not even angry with her for her leaving. She followed her dreams, and did what she believed in. It just... didn't work out. Life is like that: some things just don't work out."

Will stops speaking, and closes his eyes, letting the darkness fall on him, silent and soothing. He enjoys it for a while before he goes on.

"This turned out to be an unhappy story, after all. Do you want to hear something happier?" He keeps his eyes closed, nestling his face in the soft, warm curve of Hannibal's neck, under the older boy's chin. "I caught a crab last week while fishing. It was a huge, fat one with ruby red shell and long legs. I can catch one for you too, if you want. Would you like me to do that?"

A sudden breeze in Will's hair, just a hint of a touch – and Hannibal's quiet response is murmured into his curls, "Yes. Please."

For a second, Will forgets to breathe. Hannibal's voice was so soft, and deep, and calm, and polite... His accent a lot heavier than while practicing lessons, but still, these two slurred words are enough to melt Will's nervously tense muscles into trembling jelly in an instant. Hannibal has spoken to him! And hasn't just simply spoken, but reacted to a question! He has given an answer! A real answer!

Will's heart is beating like a machine in turmoil, and all he can feel is that he is the happiest person in the world, even though he is not even sure whether Hannibal really understands what a crab is, since they haven't learned this word together yet. "Alright," Will whispers his

answer into Hannibal's neck, inwards trembling from utter joy. "I'm going to catch a crab for you next week."

And then – going with his first instinct – he puts his hand on Hannibal's chest, and starts stroking him in order to show him how happy he is.

Will understands that the fact that Hannibal finally spoke to him for real means that Hannibal let him closer on a whole new level. He has started to consider Will someone who is worthy of an inner thought that occurred inside his head. Even if it's just a tiny reply, it's more valuable than books full of words, lectures full of new information, speeches full of wisdom, because it means that Hannibal has started to open up for Will.

And this thought fills Will with bliss, and he is trembling, eyes closed, hand above Hannibal's heart, catching his breath, feeling dizzy... The shock of happiness washes away everything else. Will has never felt anything like this before. He hasn't been happy often, and especially not because of another human being. The stormy force of this feeling almost scares him now, and finally, sudden wariness sobers him to a degree.

"I... I like you a lot," Will admits with a nervous shudder, feeling the need to explain his uncontrolled reaction to Hannibal, while pulling his hand away from the older boy's chest. "I guess the way I've touched you is something people would call 'not right'. They tell me that I should be less direct with some things when I interact with people. It's just... I like you so much, and I'm so happy that you spoke to me. I hope you are not angry with me for touching you like that. And... and I know this is something boys shouldn't do to each other. I was just... I'm sorry."

Will doesn't open his eyes, even though his empathy skill would be able to read Hannibal's reaction and opinion if he did, but he is not sure he is brave enough to face it. He chooses to let darkness cover everything...

Up until he feels something warm and wet on his mouth. Will's eyes spring open as the sticky, uneven warmth slides along his skin.

Hannibal has started licking the younger boy's mouth.

Will can see the next lap of the older boy's tongue gently follow the line of sensitive skin along his lips. He lets out a shocked growl, and the sound makes Hannibal stop.

After the first wave of astonishment, the thoughts of kissing Hannibal – which have left after the unexpected and gruesome interruption of their play – rush back into Will's mind. He tilts his head a bit, and then slightly, tentatively opens his mouth. But Hannibal won't start again, he just watches Will without a stir.

Will leans a bit closer, lips still parted, nearing the older boy's mouth slowly and carefully. He stops only when he can already feel Hannibal's soft, inaudible breaths on his tongue. There's less than an inch between their lips.

Will waits, but the older boy doesn't give any encouraging sign. He is motionless like a sculpture again. For a last second, Will tries to think of any situation where licking someone

else's lips might not suggest a need for intimate closeness, but when he can't figure out any, he moves a bit forward, and lets his mouth touch Hannibal's.

His whole body is shaking from emotional overburden as his lips start to patiently stroke the older boy's pale skin. Hannibal is still like an inanimate statue made of ice, but Will doesn't stop, and he presses his mouth on the older boy with slightly more force. He is a bit worried about Hannibal's motionlessness though, yet, he tells himself that Hannibal is the one who initiated the kiss with the licks, so sooner or later, he will probably start to return it. Will senses that behind the blank mask of disinterest, Hannibal is curious about this new experience, about the new challenge it carries, and especially about the improvement of their relationship. Will can feel it in his veins... But as time passes, the older boy still won't kiss him back.

"If you don't want to kiss... just push me away, okay?" Will breathes against Hannibal's lips, and continues giving his uncertain kisses. The silence of the tall, grandiose bookshelves, tons of books and antique bronze sculptures is filled with the soft, wet sounds Will's mouth makes against the older boy's.

However, the next second, Hannibal's calm, inert muscles come to life, and he is pushing Will down on his back with so much strength that Will lets out a frightened mewl and falls on the ground. Believing that the push was a rough sign of refusal, Will hastily tries to pull away and sit up. But right then, Hannibal's weight tenses against him, pressing him back down on the floor. And the older boy's body is all over Will, his mouth is on Will's, forcing the smaller boy into a violent, hungry kiss with relentless force.

Wild, eager bites against his mouth, wet pushes of a tongue... Will loses every rational thought about how he planned their kiss, and he lets the firestorm of Hannibal's sudden helpless longing burn away his self-control too. He gives in to deep, untamed instincts.

Will hasn't realized when he did that, but he finds his fingers entangled in Hannibal's blond, straight mops of hair, pressing Hannibal's head down, increasing the strength of their kiss to an almost unbearable degree...

When they briefly pause to take a ragged breath before they continue, Will sees that there are already small stains of blood mixed with drool on Hannibal's lips, and he can feel the red, metallic string of salt dribbling from his own mouth too, but he is unable to control his actions any more. The moist, tart taste of Hannibal's mouth brings some never-felt hunger to life in him. Something so raw, and instinctual, and exciting that it throws a veil over any caution. Will knows that they both want this. He wants to fall into the abyss of this kiss, into the inner world of the boy embracing him with desperate force, and Hannibal wants the same. He wants to explore Will's mind, his reactions and his feelings in a way he hasn't done before.

They are growling, and huffing and puffing into each other's mouth between the next bites, pulling each other into a new, even more vehement kiss.

Bodies

Chapter Notes

Explicit slash content (underage).

Will tastes different from anything Hannibal has ever sampled before. Will's mouth is like raw meat, pure and natural, and yet strange like a rare foreign spice. Hannibal can feel so much of Will as he moves his tongue in and out of the wetness, jaws pressed rough against each other, teeth gnashing, tasting each other hungrily, that he completely forgets about the outer world. When he has to breathe again, it almost surprises him, while lifting his head up, that he sees books, shelves, and sculptures.

Maybe they should stop, but Will seems so delectable, so fragile and yet, so strong in his arms that Hannibal is unable to retreat.

Instead, he pulls Will's oversized t-shirt away a bit, in order to be able to see at least a small part of his torso. Will's skin is pale and soft, ribs stained with the more or less blurred, black-and-blue marks left after some beatings he suffered.

As Hannibal briefly looks up at the smaller boy's face, he spots a hint of uneasiness in Will's light-colored eyes, maybe indicating that Will is a bit worried about how the older boy is going to react to the way his body looks. In response, Hannibal wants to make him understand that he finds every inch interesting and pleasing to the senses. The bruises and small scars are the signs of Will's strength, and show how beautiful Will's mind is. Therefore, he pushes the texture of the t-shirt even further up on Will's chest, uncovering more of Will's bruised, gaunt body.

Around the upper muscles, a little bit below the clavicles, he stops, because at this point, while one hand buried in Hannibal's hair, Will moves his other arm between their bodies, and starts to undo a button on Hannibal's pajama shirt.

Suddenly, Hannibal ceases undressing Will. He makes a brief motion to put his hand on Will's and make him stop, but before he could reach Will's fingers, Will pauses, and blinks up at him with a questioning, timid look in his eyes.

Hannibal finds himself utterly surprised by the way Will is trying to explore his body. It seems natural that he wants to do it to Will like this, but somehow it perplexes him that Will feels the same way about him.

Hannibal has soon learned at an early age that he should consider his body as a useful object. Anything that has to do with physical appearance is a tool to charm people. A tool to keep them dazed, awaken hunger in them, throw a veil over their rational deliberations, and make

them easy to influence. Bodily beauty is something to be *used*. If there's one thing he has learned in the real world, then this is it.

But the way Will's shivery fingers fumble with his pajama shirt now, and the way the bleary, bashful curiosity swirls in those small, glimmering stars in his eyes make Hannibal's heart miss a beat. Will doesn't want to see something that might be a tool to please him. Will wants to see *Hannibal*. The real Hannibal, his body, his reactions, his desire... The same way Hannibal is curious about Will, and the same way Hannibal wants to see Will.

Will needs to be understood and wants to understand Hannibal, and Hannibal needs to be understood and wants to understand Will. And this is the moment when Hannibal truly realizes this. Because of their special mindsets, they could belong to each other in a way no one else can... if they let it happen.

The next moment, Will removes his fingers from Hannibal's pajama top.

"Maybe, some other day... when you'll want it more," the smaller boy mutters with a nervous blush, letting his hand sink onto the carpet beside his body.

Hannibal understands the sentence, and accepts Will's decision with a short, low growl. Putting his hand to Will's face, he swiftly caresses the smaller boy's soft cheeks. His fingertips find a spot where he bit Will a night ago, and he instinctively squeezes the wound.

Will gives a sudden moan, muscles stretching tightly.

Hannibal takes in how Will's body has responded to his touch, and he chooses to experiment further, to try something else too. He starts watching Will's nipples. The two small, light pink circles of flesh became visible as he rolled up the smaller boy's shabby t-shirt. He is not sure how Will is going to react, but he is curious, so he tentatively puts his hand on one of Will's nipples, and rubs it. Will loses his breath, his lips part with an almost choking, eager sound leaving them, and Hannibal sees that he has found a very sensitive spot.

He decides that he likes to make Will's body respond to his, so he repeats the motion, a bit stronger this time, making Will emit a craving noise again.

Hannibal generally likes having some interesting effect on people if the outcome might be intriguing, but this is more than that. This is like creation. Having the ability to give Will sensations the smaller boy wouldn't be able to feel on his own. And Will does the same to him. Hannibal feels a deep, pure longing he wouldn't be able to feel alone. They bring something valuable to life together. Something that wouldn't exist without both of them. This is not just a quick, routine need he had before and could easily attend to with his own hands. Will's groans, his uncertain, small strokes on the older boy's back, and his other hand massaging the older boy's scalp make Hannibal's body come to life in a way it has never done before.

He leans to Will's ear, and after briefly smelling the short hairs standing with shivery excitement on the back of the smaller boy's neck, he utters in a low murmur, "I like you."

He is not sure if this is the phrase he is supposed to use for Will because while learning, Will mentioned it to describe fondness for inanimate objects like food or abstract concepts like music. But a few minutes ago Will himself told something like 'I like you' to Hannibal when explaining why he touched the older boy's chest, so Hannibal decides that with these few words, he can probably express what he wants to say, or at least something similar.

And when he senses the unwitting, yearning writhe of Will's body under him after hearing the sentence, he can feel reassured that he said what he meant to say. Will starts trembling under him with the same fitful, feverish jerks as when Hannibal gave his very first real answer. Will's fingers – entangled in Hannibal's blond, poorly-cut hair – involuntarily clench and ball up into a fist around the light, straight mops of hair, causing a slightly painful, but also pleasantly stimulating feeling at the back of the older boy's head. The smaller boy's limbs are shaking, pupils dilating, breaths hitching... yet Will finds enough clearness in himself to soon release Hannibal's hair, and turn the spasmodic motion into soft strokes before he would truly hurt the older boy.

Hannibal enjoys that his words have such an intense effect on Will, and it impels him to speak again. But he holds back the urge because it's not just him having a strong effect on Will, but Will has a surprisingly strong effect on him too. Hannibal can feel how his own lungs race, his knuckles tense, and his mouth waters. In spite of his burning desire, Hannibal forces himself to control his reactions to a decent level of wariness. He must keep a level of sanity without melting into the feeling they create together with Will.

Yes, he likes Will, but he can't give himself completely over to another human being. Even though Will is not a simple, predictable pig-like creature, and is different and intriguing in so many ways, he can't be sure that Will is really his, and that it's safe for him to be Will's. It's better holding on to an amount of soberness.

But just when he reaches this conclusion, he can suddenly feel a small pull at his hair again, and Will presses his head closer to his.

"You are perfect," Will breathes into the older boy's ear. "You are perfect... perfect..."

Hannibal feels a new drag of a lustful feeling building up in his abdomen, tensing his crotch, making his whole body become taut on top of Will. It feels as if Will knew exactly what could ultimately turn him on and blur his doubts into barely visible fog... Perfection is something Hannibal always had an instinctual, admiring longing for. And Will saying that he is perfect arouses him to an almost unbearable degree. This is another interesting sign of the strange ways Will's mind works and can relate to Hannibal's, and Hannibal finds it both appetizing and beautiful.

The strong effect Will's words have on him doesn't make him cautious anymore. He understands that Will uses his skills to please him, not to try to flaw him. Maybe it's time to let their bodies work their own ways without mentally pulling away. Let them affect each other, taste each other, and see each other.

His curiosity is too strong, his desire is too deep, and finally, all he can feel is that he wants to try this experience. No matter what the risks and consequences are, he wants to see this beauty, and wants to explore every part of it.

Hannibal buries his face in the curve of Will's neck, whispering, "I like you," again.

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Will's neck and lower back must already be aching from the force of the erratic jerks tensing his body, and Hannibal's muscles are sore too. His nape is also giving pain from the uncontrolled pressure of Will's fingers keeping the older boy's head down against his. But they couldn't care less about pain. Their bodies push against each other, while hands are aimlessly roaming up and down on each other's arms and shoulders. Through Will's thin underwear and his own pajama pants, Hannibal can feel the warmth of Will's erection rubbing against his, sending jolts of yearning to the core of his body.

Will is breathing rapidly in short gasps, louder and louder with each throb of passion stroking his groin. The sounds that leave the smaller boy's throat make Hannibal's arousal turn so strong that he starts to completely lose grip with reality. And then, panting into Hannibal's ear, Will whispers an unintelligible sentence they either haven't learned together yet, or Hannibal is too far from a clear state of mind to be able to understand, but the affectionate tone of the words is enough to melt away every last attempt to hold back.

Hannibal tenses his palms against the carpet, digging his fingers into the dark red fibers, and pressing his mouth onto Will's forehead, half-kissing-half-biting, he orgasms with a last few vehement, longing spasms of muscles.

Then he collapses on top of Will, and for a while, he is silently fighting for breath, stroking Will's side with one hand, and pressing his face to Will's neck.

But then, he feels through the damp texture of his gray pajama pants that Will is still hard against him.

Hannibal lifts his upper body, leaning on his elbows, and looks into Will's eyes. They are blurred blue, and unsteady, unable to stand eye contact. The older boy senses that Will still has some ingrained doubts about what they are doing, and the subconscious hesitancy hinders the eruption of his pleasure.

Maybe, it would be easier for Will if they stopped, but Hannibal is not willing to let the smaller boy take a way out. He wants to push Will over the edge the way Will did to him, so he slides his hand between their abdomens, and lowers it until he can feel Will's erection through the slippery stains of his own semen covering Will's underwear.

Will's face flushes light red, and the smaller boy mumbles something Hannibal doesn't understand, but it's probably a weak attempt to protest. While starting to stroke Will's pulsating hardness with slowly intensifying speed through the stained fabric, Hannibal puts his mouth on Will's, and bites him lazily to soothe the smaller boy's misgivings.

The kiss-like bite helps a lot, and Will's hips start twitching, eyes shut tight, arms thrown around Hannibal's back, holding him desperately. And soon, even more warm fluid soaks their thighs as Will pushes against Hannibal's hand one last time and then falls back on the floor, limp.

And then they are lying on their backs next to each other on the carpet, sleepy and satisfied, drawing heavy breaths. They are both keeping their eyes on the ceiling, probably because they have not much idea what else to do. But it's nice and comfortable, and Hannibal doesn't mind the clumsy, inactive silence.

He feels something that almost surprises him. He feels happy, in a way he hasn't felt since he lost his family. Will feels like a new home. A chance to build something beautiful, but unpredictable from the ruins.

He thinks of his world and a life without Will, and for the last time, he considers the idea of killing the smaller boy. He either does it now, or he should leave his doubts behind and give himself over to the sensation of belonging to Will, because there is no point in pondering over these questions any longer. Will has given himself completely over to him, and Hannibal has given himself completely over to Will. There's no turning back. He either accepts this, or ultimately cuts these ties. There's nothing in between.

Hannibal has always been the one to quickly and effectively decide, and it frustrates him how difficult it is to make a clear, final decision about Will. It should be easy. But it's not.

He can feel how much he wants these dreams and his imaginary world with Will in it... And he doesn't want to know what it would be like without Will. He doesn't want to know what they would transform themselves into without each other. How they would learn lonely ways of adapting to a shameful, disgusting world, trying to find beauty in places where they'll just walk through without belonging.

But he has also created a long list of reasons he should get rid of Will. Everything would be clear and simple without him. Will makes everything a bit incalculable and insecure. Will has his own doubts about Hannibal; he hides his own secrets in the stars shining in his pale blue eyes, and the bitterness of his own past experiences pulls the corners of his eyebrows into sad, burned-out frowns...

And choosing a life with Will means the leaving of an important chance behind. Hannibal will have to let go of the chance to transform into the Hannibal Lecter he has dreamed to be one day. Giving a part of him to Will, and accepting a part of Will while melting into each other's inner worlds mean that they are going to mentally grow up together, transform each other, and invisibly change each other's minds in ways no one can predict. It might be beautiful, it might be interesting, it might be an exciting challenge, but it's not going to be the same as without Will. Is it worth the risk?

Hannibal might deliberate this question as long as he wants, but he already feels the answer, because there is only one answer he is able to accept. He can't withstand it.

However, the most important question still looms over. Even if he is able to give up his doubts after tonight, is Will able to do the same?

Gifts

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

When Will wakes up on top of the boxes in the storage room, his body is as relaxed and his head is as light as if he took a magic potion to erase all the weariness and distress he had gone through in the past few weeks. A sluggish, but happy smile spreads across his face.

He washed his underwear in Hannibal's bathroom before waking up, but just to make sure that no suspicious stains remain, he washes it under the tap again before his dad gets up after a drunken, unsteady sleep.

As Will is standing there in front of the broken, blurred mirror in the small bathroom, watching his own pale complexion with disorderly curls and heavily blinking eyes, he tries to find at least a hint of shame in himself because of what he did with Hannibal last night. He should feel at least a ghost of guilt about it... but he doesn't. It was wonderful and sensual, and something he would do again even if he could change what had happened. He doesn't feel bad about it at all. No matter what his dad says, this didn't feel wrong, not in the least. And seeing Hannibal orgasm was probably the most beautiful thing Will has ever seen before. Hannibal let him closer and opened up for him in a way Will didn't even dare hope for. They dragged each other over their emotional breaking points, and developed a bond that's so strong and deep that it mesmerizes Will. And this is all that matters.

Will wants to make sure that Hannibal understands that the physical contact they had last night was not just about gaining some bodily relief. It has meant way more than that. It has meant the deepest connection Will has ever had. The smaller boy wonders how he could express this, and finally, he decides that he is going to give a gift to Hannibal. That's what boys usually do if they want to convince their girlfriends about their affection, isn't it? Perhaps, it could work in the case of two boys, too. A special gift can show that he wants to please Hannibal, and not just on a physical level.

Since it's already weekend, he has some free time, and he decides that he'll set out to catch the crab he promised. It's going to be a surprise if he gives it this evening and not the next week, and hopefully, the older boy will find this change of plans pleasant.

Therefore, Will goes down to the water with some nets and hooks, and spends his day hunting for Hannibal's gift.

As the night arrives, he already keeps a glass jar in his left hand under the blanket when falling asleep, and the round jar contains a small, red crab. It's not as big as the last one he caught, but Will is satisfied with this smaller one too, because it has an interesting pattern on

the back of its shell, like a secret map from light-colored lines. He hopes that Hannibal is going to like it.

Shivery, short-breathed exhalations of excitement escape his lips as he enters the cold marble palace.

He finds Hannibal on one of the balconies; the older boy is watching the night sky around the building. Surrounded by star shine, his lean figure in his gray pajamas seems silvery, and his blond hair bleached like the whiteness of marble around him. For a moment, Will stops and watches with awe how beautiful Hannibal is.

“I have something for you,” Will eventually blurts out as a greeting, with a blush of nervousness warmly tinting his cheeks. “It’s not as grand as I was hoping for, but... but... I hope you don’t mind.”

And Will tries to hand the jar to Hannibal. He spots with surprise that the older boy keeps something in his hand too. A dark sack made of black frieze, containing something with the size and shape of a melon.

“This is for you,” Hannibal tells Will with a strong accent, looking a bit tense because of the importance of the moment, moving the sack in Will’s direction slowly, inch-by-inch.

Already the fact that Hannibal spoke to him again makes Will’s knees weak, and the idea that they both thought about the same thing turns Will’s soft blush into burning redness. They both have been planning to give a gift to each other!

Hands trembling, he takes the sack from Hannibal, and opens it with curiosity, while Hannibal holds the crab jar between his palms, rotating it gradually.

Will peers into the depth of the black cloth, and he sees some stained white texture, some tangled material like dry grass, and an ashen-colored, rubber-like something covered with dark red spots... accompanied by the pungent smell of blood. And, as he has a closer look, he can make out what his gift is. The freshly cut-off head of an old man. There is still a white hairnet covering the top of the old man’s disorderly hair, indicating that the man had to follow some sanitary rules while working. Maybe he was a cook.

Will jumps with a start, letting the sack fall to the ground from his hands, and he blinks at Hannibal with astonishment.

Hannibal looks back at him with innocent expectance in his maroon eyes. He is obviously waiting for Will to express enjoyment over his gift.

“Oh, this is... this...” Will makes an attempt to control the pace of his breathing in order to be able to form a sentence, but as he thinks of the blood-stained head, he starts to hyperventilate again. “You... you... Oh, no...”

Hannibal must see that he won’t get praise, because he turns to his own gift, and has a look at the crab once more. Taking it out of the jar, he pinches it between two fingers, and examines it. The glimmer in the older boy’s brown eyes indicates that he likes his gift.

Will lets out a noise that is close to a slurred groan, and then the words burst out of him in a frantic rush, “Did you kill this man?! Or did you break into a mortuary? Or what?!”

Hannibal directs his dark eyes over the red shell of the crab towards Will’s shaking figure. The way he straightens his back, proud, and gives Will a distant smile is like saying without words, “I slaughtered this pig and prepared it specifically for you”.

Will rubs his forehead, and carefully, turns towards the fallen sack and the pale, cold head lying on the ground. He takes a small step, and then slowly lifts the cloth up, elevating the body part with it too. When he is finally able to speak, his voice is timid and low. “I... I like that you were thinking of me. It’s... nice of you.”

Hannibal watches him without blinking. The look on his ever-so-cold face now gradually turns soft and full of fondness as he gives his reply, “I always think of you.”

Will takes a big breath, and trying hard not to inhale the stench of raw blood and tissue, he holds the head into his field of vision, scrutinizing it. For a while, he manages to examine it without flinching, but he soon has to look away, otherwise the sight of the discolored, violet, ragged skin around the old man’s throat – where Hannibal clumsily chopped the meat and the spine, probably with some weak kitchen tool inappropriate for cutting bones and sinews – would make him throw up.

Will struggles with his natural disgust and his moral scruples, and finally manages to keep the head in his hand without tossing it aside again.

The head is ugly, repulsive, and upsetting, but it’s a sign of Hannibal’s affection. And Will knows that this moment now is not just about a simple gift. This means way more than that. It’s the moment when he has to come to terms with his doubts about Hannibal and with the fact that Hannibal is a monster. And Hannibal knows it too – that’s why he gave the head to Will. This gift is a tacit question: “You already know who I am. Are you able to love me like this?” And Will has to decide now what his answer will be.

One hand holding the head by the sack, Will runs his other palm along his eyebrows, rubbing his forehead again.

There has always been some twisted duality in the emotional attachments Will has had. He has always felt an irrepressible, hopeless need to help the ones who went astray, like he did to his dog, and he has always suspected that this wish has come from the way he has had to grow up. The most important relationship he has ever had – his relationship with his dad – has been filled with a fundamental contradiction. He has accepted that his father cannot be saved from himself, and yet, deep in his heart he still couldn’t stop wanting that something – anything – could help. Yes, he soon accepted that his father could not be fixed, but he couldn’t kill the senseless hope lurking in the back of his mind, which was also fueled by his dad’s empty promises and ephemeral attempts to pull himself together, no matter how deep Will has rationally understood that it’s impossible. He couldn’t fully suppress this wish. Erasing it would have meant ultimately giving up on his dad and not loving him anymore, and Will has never been able to do that.

And now, as he stands there, with the blood-stained, ashen pale cut-off head in his hand, watching Hannibal looking back at him calmly, Will realizes that he either goes through the same pointless emotional suffering with Hannibal, or tries to find some other way this time. A way to get past the doubts he feels from the day Hannibal showed him his true face when torturing him, and with it, also showed him the morbid cruelty and bloodcurdling lack of compassion living in his heart. There is no way they can save each other from the monsters lurking in their heads. There's no way they can be helped. But there's one thing Will can do: he can try to enjoy how lost they are.

He can use his empathy skill to fully understand Hannibal in a way no one else can, and then slowly learn to accept him. It won't be easy, but it's worth a try.

A tired, faint smile starts to appear in the corners of Will's mouth.

"This is... this is like a trophy." He has to gulp though, before he continues. "We have something similar at home. A photo about a salmon my dad caught two years ago. It's his favorite catch. It's the only decoration he put on the walls." Will throws an unsteady glimpse at the head in his hand again. "Maybe, we could dry this... thing, and... and put it on one of the walls here. Like... like an item of decoration."

For a while, Hannibal just watches him, frozen and expressionless, but then the warm affection that slowly fills his dark eyes again melts Will's heart.

"Yes," Hannibal replies finally. "The study?"

Will clears his throat. "Well, maybe something less frequently visited."

"Your first room?"

Will nods, and steps closer to him. He knows that trying to make Hannibal understand that what he did is horrible is useless. No more effective than telling a venomous snake not to bite. So Will, still keeping the head in one hand, hugs the older boy with his other arm.

"You are a monster," he whispers, while gently kissing Hannibal on the lips. "That's who you are. You showed this to me right at the beginning. You didn't try to hide your true face, and I respect you for that. You were honest with me instead of lying and fronting. You were brave enough to show me your true self. And you gave me a chance to learn to love you for who you really are... and I'm trying. And I'll keep trying, I promise."

Will moves his tongue into Hannibal's mouth, softly wanting to feel more of him... But suddenly, he stops, and pulls back.

He asks with growing suspicion, "Why does your mouth taste like blood?"

Hannibal just tilts his head to one side, and sends a sated glimpse from under flat eyelids to Will.

Will stands there rooted, and needs a few seconds to compose himself. But then finally, he gives a sour smile, and wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "It's okay. Please don't

reply.”

They stay there on the balcony, surrounded by dark blue and stars, and watch each other for long minutes in silence. And then, with a swift, imperative motion, Hannibal takes Will by the hand, and leads him back into the building.

They start to walk through stairs and corridors towards the marble room to compose a suitable place for their gifts.

Dreams

Chapter Notes

For warnings, please read the Author's Note at the beginning of the story.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Entangled in each other's arms, they are lying on the double bed in the bedroom under Will's red-golden blanket. They both smell like sweat and sex, lips sticky with semen and saliva, muscles slack, naked bodies pressed against each other... Hannibal rests his head next to Will's, and they are watching each other dreamily, half asleep. It makes Will wonder whether he has ever felt this close to Hannibal before.

His relationship with Hannibal still seems like fruitless attempts to tame a monster that simply cannot be tamed, but it slowly turns more and more natural as Will gets accustomed to it. And what they did to each other tonight with their mouths was so intimate and gratifying that it seemed to melt away some more of their deeply instilled resistance. Even though Hannibal was so violently eager to taste Will and took so much of Will's length in, that after one point, Will had to grab him by the hair and make him stop. Will was terrified that Hannibal might hurt himself, since the older boy had already been letting out choking sounds. And Will also felt anxious for his own safety because Hannibal's sharp teeth started worrying his sensitive skin with frightening strength. Hannibal's displeased, scary growl that followed Will's desperate action to stop him made the smaller boy's heart drop, but Hannibal soon ceased looking at him with the reptilian, dead stare full of the hypnotic obsession of a carnivore. Instead, he climbed up on the bed next to Will, put his arms around the smaller boy's trembling body, and with one hand, ruffled Will's hair as a sign of forgiveness. And when Will slipped out of the embrace to lean over Hannibal's lap and taste him in return with careful, small licks, Hannibal finally stopped emitting the hostile growl, and ended up on his back, drawing in contented and silent, yet labored breaths.

And now they are both satisfied and relaxed, lying in the bed in each other's arms.

When Hannibal breaks the silence, his thick words are just a murmur, "I want to stay here."

It still makes Will's inwards tremble with utter joy whenever the older boy speaks, even though he should've started to get accustomed to it during the past few weeks. They have multiple routines now: bringing each other small gifts, sometimes dinner too, taking walks in the building, having their exhausting play-fight, hours-long language learning, and then, they spend the rest of the night in bed, experimenting with ways of pleasuring each other. And sometimes – very rarely and briefly though – Hannibal speaks to him. Real speaking, his own thoughts, not just repeated phrases like during lessons. At best, three or four sentences. It happens at irregular intervals, and mostly without any prelude, and it's always a pleasant, exciting surprise for Will.

“Stay here?” Will’s reply is also croaky from drowsiness, but his heart is already beating with alert happiness. “You mean forever? You don’t want to wake up?”

Hannibal doesn’t answer.

“If that’s what you mean... it would be nice.” Will gives a sleepy smile, adjusting his arms around the older boy’s waist. “I’d like that, too.”

Hannibal puts a hand on Will’s bare chest, above the smaller boy’s rapidly beating heart, and Will notices the ligature marks around the older boy’s wrist again. They are much less apparent than they were when he had a closer look at them weeks ago in the bathroom, but they are still visible. A thought hits Will like a struck of lightning, and he sits up with sudden vigor, putting his fingertips on Hannibal’s old wounds.

“Come, and find me,” Will bites out with excitement, hastily massaging Hannibal’s bruises. “Come, and live with me.”

When Hannibal gives no response, the next words burst out of Will in a hectic flood, he is so enthusiastic about what he is saying, “I’ll work double shifts at the coffee shop for some real payment, and collect the money for you. As much as you need. I can also get it exchanged for the currency of your country. Maybe you could give me a real address where I can send the money to you. And then, you can buy an airline ticket and travel to my place. We’ll find a way to get you any paper you might need – I know a guy from the alley behind our home who sells some weird stuff. I’ll do anything he wants, and I’ll get you the necessary papers from him. Please, come to me.” The speed of Will’s breathing increases as he continues with his idea, “I would say you are an exchange student. We could go to school together, you could work with me at the coffee shop, and perhaps, you are old enough to sell some fish at the market. I think my dad would be angry first, but if you worked hard enough and didn’t interfere with his drinking, he’d be alright with you staying with us. Once, I brought a dog home, and he kicked her to death when he was very drunk, saying that she ate too much, but I’ll make sure he won’t hurt you. You’ll make yourself useful. And I... I’ll protect you, no matter what.” Will’s voice is already wavering from exhilaration. “You could sleep in my room. I mean, it’s just a storage room, it’s not very nice, but it’s okay. If my dad is drunk enough and can’t see us, we can also sleep together on my mattress. But only if he is very drunk. He wouldn’t like that. But... but we can do that. Or I’ll buy you a mattress. I can work more. You know, they offered me that I could go and set the tables and arrange the chairs in the morning, from 3 to 5, I was just too tired to do it so far, but I wouldn’t be tired if I did that for you. Yes, I’ll do that. I’ll work some more, and buy you a mattress. And a blanket and a toothbrush and things like that. Please, come, and live with me.”

Will stops, because he perceives that Hannibal’s face has grown pale, and it just turns whiter with every word the smaller boy utters. Not understanding the reason for this, Will moves closer in order to look Hannibal in the eye, and what he sees there almost scares him. He sees lifeless sadness.

And then Hannibal gets up from the bed, wipes his hands into one of the bed sheets, pulls his gray pajama pants on, and leaves the room with composed, slow steps.

Will emits a small puff of surprise, and supports his back by a cushion, sitting on the bed, musing over the older boy's odd reaction, puzzled. He doesn't get what's going on, and absent-mindedly strokes his favorite blanket with his palms, wondering, choosing to wait a while before doing anything. And Hannibal soon returns. He keeps a brown paper bag, in which Will brought dinner from the coffee shop, in one hand, and a pen in the other one.

"Why do we need that?" Will asks, completely at a loss.

Hannibal just sits down in front of him onto the bed. He turns the paper bag to the side where the printing date of the logo is visible, and then he circles the date with the pen.

"Yes?" Will finds himself still confused. "That's the day I brought you some doughnuts. They make these bags at the coffee shop with their own equipment, and print their logo and the date of delivery on them. So what?"

Hannibal writes another date under the logo, a date with a ten-year difference. A day from about ten years earlier.

Will gapes at the numbers, trying to figure out what Hannibal wants to show him... And when he finally understands, it seems to him that his whole world has collapsed.

A rush of emotions veil his eyes. Everything turns into a blur, and the walls seem to melt into waves of amorphous curves. The colors are fading... as a huge teardrop forms in the corner of his eye and runs down his cheek.

From the first day they met, Will has fantasized about Hannibal being real. A real boy living thousands of miles away from him. And though he never really considered it up until now, he has always wished to meet him one day... And he secretly believed that they could do that sooner or later. And tonight, when suddenly figuring out the idea that Hannibal could travel to his place, Will finally realized that it was all he ever wanted... All he ever needed in order to find happiness and comfort, and make the dull darkness of his days brighten up, and start a real change...

Will feels a helpless feeling tear into him. Deep, unstoppable pain weakens him, and he collapses on the bed.

"No, no, no." That's the only word he growls into the creases of his red-golden blanket, burying his face into the warm plush, palming the soft texture with bitter despair.

He understands now that it's not just thousands of miles parting them, but also ten years. In the real world, Hannibal had these dreams ten years ago. The palace they share links them in their dreams, but nothing else. They cannot just simply meet, cannot just simply find each other, because as long as they dream about each other in Will's lonely present, that means they still haven't met... How could they meet in a mutual present, if they dream about something that partially happened ten years ago and in some sense, that's their present? These are just dreams, not a full synchrony of their realities... This is some twisted mixture of their separate presents and half-joined dreams, but not a perfect link. And ten years have passed for Hannibal after these dreams, without meeting Will in real life! Otherwise, Will

wouldn't be lonely now... And as long as they dream about each other with this strange link as a part of their current reality, they cannot change their loneliness, can they?

Almost choking on the spasmodic stings of his despair, Will rasps. The soft pressure of the waves of his plush blanket feels like the perfect contrast against his dark pain. It seems to him that his heart has been torn out of his chest, and now there's only a gaping, blood-leaking hole at the place of it, burning, pulsating with throbs of pain...

He is able to regain some of his composure only when he feels Hannibal's fingers on the top of his head, and the older boy soothingly strokes his nape.

"We... we cannot be together," Will coughs into the bed sheets, voice hoarse from pain. And then, a messy jumble of tormented words leave his lips, "If we want to meet here, in our dreams, we cannot be together in real life. Otherwise... it would be your future... And you cannot dream about your own future in the past, it's simply impossible... It might destroy everything... This is the only way we can stay like this and keep dreaming about each other like this, linked together over a ten-year gap... if... if never meet in real life. This is such a chaos... Our time... our time is not the same... The time and our dreams... The time..." Will is unable to continue.

"Yes," Hannibal utters plainly.

The older boy's disillusioned calmness gives Will some strength to handle his shock, and he sits up on the bed, rubbing away some disheveled curls from his forehead. He is huffing and puffing, cheeks burning red, eyes tearful.

"But... but you knew this. You have known this for a long time," he speaks tremulously, "And you told me nothing... You did nothing. Why?"

Hannibal doesn't answer. There is something in his maroon eyes that's the closest to deep emotions Will has ever seen from him. Something blurred and heavy.

"I... I don't understand," Will stutters. His bitter despair and black sea of sadness have been replaced by the burning wish to find solution. "Maybe, we could try to change the future... I mean, my present and your future. I could give you some information that would be enough to change the happenings of these ten years. Perhaps, I could give you the winning numbers of a lottery or something, and then you would become rich, and you could come for me, and take me with you..."

A slight frown appears along Hannibal's forehead.

"Uh, okay, I guess you've already thought about this, and it's not a good idea," Will mumbles after a few seconds of considering. "It would probably mean the collision of this palace and the loss of our memories of each other, or something even worse, if we tried to change something this important – and I don't think we could succeed. It might also kill us. It's... it's very likely that it would destroy us. Let's figure something else out." Will rubs his forehead, concentrating with some difficulty. "What if I jumped out of a window of your palace, into the empty darkness? Maybe, that way, I could leave your palace forever, and then we could find each other in our reality. I guess, the earliest we will be able to meet is when you'll be

like 25-26. For me, that would be just a brief while of waiting, but at least ten years for you. And... and most probably it would take more time... It might take many more years for our timelines to align. But at one point, we'd be able to find each other in a common reality, I believe. Perhaps decades later, when we would already be adults." When Hannibal doesn't respond, Will proceeds with his idea, "That means I'll have to leave your dream palace right now. As long as we dream about this place, we are linked together in our dreams, but parted from each other in our reality. And time just passes... Why haven't you told me about this? I... I'll have to leave as soon as possible."

Hannibal gently puts his palms on Will's hands, and silences him. "No," the older boy says in slurred, quiet breaths. "I want you here, in my dreams. And never meet you in real life."

Will blinks at Hannibal with surprise. "But... but, why?"

The older boy gives no reply.

Will tries to reason, even though it barely seems possible he is so shaken. "Maybe if we gave up this dream world and met as adults... things would be easier for us. We would be more mature, more experienced, so we wouldn't have to go through this much pain in order to learn how to love each other. Everything would be more simple and clear with so much knowledge of life... Wouldn't it?" Will swallows back a sob that tries to break forth from his throat. "And... and we could get some nice jobs, live in a fine house, with a couple of dogs, and... and books, and everything we like. We could have clothes, meals, rooms, anything. And... and all of these would be real. Real! Even better than here in your palace. Together all day and all night. I... I think we'd have a beautiful life. We could adopt children too. And we could be the happiest family in the world. A real life together! Don't you want this?"

Hannibal just stares at him, with his solid decision glimmering in his eyes.

Will shakes his head feverishly, "Why would you choose a false world that only exists in our dreams... over a real relationship we could have?"

Hannibal doesn't reply.

"I don't understand you... I don't understand..." Will iterates huskily. He grabs Hannibal's hands and holds them tight. "Don't you want to be with me some day? Like... like a real couple? We'd just have to be patient, and wait for each other, until the time comes. We'd find each other, I'm sure of that."

Hannibal still doesn't answer; he maintains eye contact without a stir.

Will tries to see, he tries to figure out the reason the older boy doesn't like his idea, and then, finally, he understands. And what he realizes makes his heart sink.

Will closes his eyes and hangs his head.

The room seems to turn eerily cold as if the glossy marble surfaces were made of ice. The flickers of the crystal chandelier hanging above are pooling into glassy, elusive teardrops of light on the floor.

As Will speaks again, disenchanted emptiness fills his tone, “You are right. We’d never have the life I’ve just described.” His voice slightly falters, but he continues, and lets the most painful words leave his lips, “It’d be too late to learn how to love each other. The world would take me from you and take you from me. The lonely years would change us, and it’d be irredeemable. It’d be too late, for both of us. You don’t want to lose what we have now... even though these are just dreams.”

Hannibal puts his hand to Will’s chin, and pulls him closer, touching his forehead to Will’s, like he did after he had almost strangled the smaller boy in the bathroom. The touch is comforting, and eases some of Will’s pain.

“I want you to stay here,” the older boy utters in low, mumbling tones. “I want to stay with you here.”

Will presses his face to Hannibal’s in response, while whispering, “I’ll stay.”

And after that, there is only silence lingering around them, covering everything with its invisible, yet heavy veil. Then, surrounded by the warm creases of their golden-red plush blanket, their lips gently touch, and they melt into a sad dream kiss that feels more real than the whole world they’ll have to visit alone again in a couple of hours.

- *The End* -

Chapter End Notes

So, that was it. :) Thank you all for reading and leaving kudos, comments, bookmarks. If you might have any questions or if you want to chat or talk, feel free to add me on skype (my ID: maitai1327).

If you are interested in my other Hannibal/Will stories 'A Way To Help', 'Problems', 'Online Catch' and 'Losing Control', you can read them on fanfiction.net (<https://www.fanfiction.net/u/4777211/MaiTai1327>).

If you are interested in my other Hannibal/Will story 'The Purple Room', you can read it on a WordPress blog (<https://maitaithepurpleroom.wordpress.com>).

If you might need help with text editing, you can find my beta profile on fanfiction.net (<https://www.fanfiction.net/beta/4777211/MaiTai1327>).

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